The background of the book cover features a woman with long dark hair and a crown, wearing a flowing golden-yellow dress. She is positioned in front of a large, white, snarling wolf with red eyes. To her left is a massive, glowing golden ring that appears to be made of fire or light. The scene is set against a dark, smoky background with a full moon in the upper right corner.

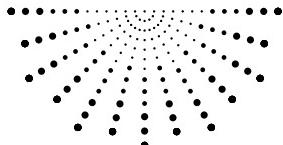
ASH — AND — ROSES

N. B. SNOOK

ASH AND ROSES

ASH AND ROSES

BOOK ONE



N.B. SNOOK



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*For those who could never decide between
the hot werewolf and the prince...*

Now you don't have to.

Turn the page. Your beast is waiting.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE & CW

Ash and Roses is a completely original story inspired by Beauty and the Beast. That said, the early chapters won't feel much like a fairytale. If that's the reason you're here, stick with it. You'll get your enemies-to-lovers Beauty and the Beast vibes. Don't worry, I've got you.

For my sensitive readers, this book deals with the following topics and themes:

Swearing, sex, death, murder, child abuse (physical), violence, depression/suicidal thoughts, loss of family members (parents and siblings), and brief but not detailed mention of sexual assault/rape.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

PLACES:

Lunae: Loon-eye

Marein: Mare-in

Dragoria: Drag-or-ee-ah

NAMES:

Abilene: Ah-bah-lean

Lunalissa: Loon-ah-liss-ah

Terranous: Tair-an-us

Tideus: Tide-us

THE UNKNOWN



Rosewood

THE JADE COAST

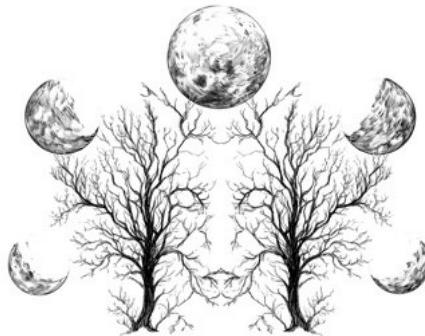
MAREIN



DRAGORIAN SEA

PROLOGUE

QUINN



*W*aking up covered in blood is a shit way to start the morning. For a few glorious seconds before reality sinks in, I forget where I am—*what I am*—but as soon as the familiar metallic tang overwhelms my senses, my eyes snap open to greet a waking nightmare.

The earth is sticky beneath me, so the kill must be fresh. Of course the monster had to get one more feeding in before it relinquished control, or perhaps it wasn't planning to let go at all this time. Coming to my senses is always a surprise now. The time I spend as human grows shorter and shorter with each month. Waking should come as a relief, so why is it always disappointment I feel?

The monster promises an escape from my past and the things I've done. There's no guilt, no pain... only bloodlust. I'm a selfish man, but am I selfish enough to become the nightmare in order to escape from my own?

I pull in a steadyng breath and turn towards what remains of the carcass. Deer—not human.

Thank fuck.

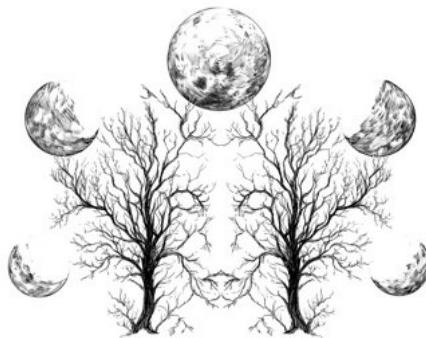
The relief I'd been waiting for finally washes over me, carried on a stiff wind. It's too early for snow, but winter is drawing ever nearer. That'll be another year lost to this darkness, and then what? The line between man and monster has become so blurred that I'm not even certain a line remains. I'll have two days in this form. Three, if I'm lucky, and then it's back to the forest.

Back to the monster.

Fuck the moon.

CHAPTER ONE

ABBY



*W*hat remains of the corpse is scattered in pieces along the edge of the forest. There'd be no hope of retrieving it all before the hunt, so the poor soul will have to wait. I can tell by the shreds of black and silver fabric that this man was a Guardian, but *which* Guardian is a question that will likely go unanswered until someone else is reported missing.

Blood always appears so much brighter against a backdrop of moonlight. When the full moon reaches its highest point in the sky, it casts an iridescent glow over ruined earth and bathes the land in silver. Nothing grows here now, save for sparse patches of jagged grass that prick like needles. They appear ashen in the gleam, and for once I'm thankful for the lavish argent gown I'm required to wear to this Gods-awful ceremony. This land wasn't always barren. Of my twenty-two years, colour blessed the first four of them. It was a world of lush greenery and small pops of yellow and orange that speckled the fields surrounding the palace. What little remains of that now lingers only in my memory.

Oh, what I would give to see just one flower again.

With a sickening squelch and a splattering of crimson, my father yanks his sword from the sacrificial pig's side. This marks the start of the Lunar Hunt, a brutal but necessary ordeal. If we don't kill enough game tonight, all will suffer and some will surely perish before the next full moon.

"My people," my father says. His benevolent tone and outstretched arms feign the desire to embrace the onlookers. This is a farce, a show for the people. Our king would no sooner touch a person of common blood as he would take part in the hunt himself. The pig at his feet is his proof of participation. He's wet his sword, and now he'll expect others to do the same. "Tonight we honour the Goddess Lunalissa and ask that she bless us under the light of the full moon. With this sacrifice, we call upon her to bring forth her bounty."

He plunges his blade into the animal again, separating head from body as the crowd murmurs a near-unintelligible, "Bless us." He holds up the dripping head by a taut ear, and my stomach lurches.

As a Daughter of Lunae, I have no choice but to watch with stoicism. The only thing worse than this display is knowing the Commander's eyes are on me. Perfection is a must during the Lunar Hunt, and I am the less-than-perfect princess. My sister, Arabella, has no trouble watching the slaughter. It disgusts her as much as it does me, but she'd long ago mastered the art of masking her emotions. No one will scrutinize her tonight, and if they did, all they would see is calculated grace and poise.

The sharp snap of a twig steals my attention, and I shift my eyes to the forest where inky shadows twist with opaline light in an endless war for dominance. Pine and fir trees tower over the divide between lush foliage and poisoned earth. Terranous may have forsaken Lunae long ago, but the forest

remains vibrant.

Hunters ready themselves in the eerie stillness that comes in the moments before the massacre. Both men and women looking to earn a higher food ration this month angle hand-carved spears and dull pitchforks toward the tree line. Actual weapons, like swords and bows, are only for the Guardians. Not even during the Lunar Hunt will my father risk arming the people. His power depends on the success of this hunt, and we know all too well what happens when the people grow hungry.

“Princess,” the Commander says in a voice colder than the midnight air. “Unless you wish to join the hunt yourself, I suggest you step back.”

Shit. I’d been so mesmerized by the forest that I hadn’t realized I’d stepped forward alongside the hunters. It’s just like me to find a way to mess this up. I can just hear Arabella’s condescending tone now, telling me how much of an embarrassment I am to this family. First it was ‘*Abilene the Merciful*,’ now it’ll be ‘*Abilene the Huntress*.’

I turn towards my family to find them standing well back from the hunters. My father’s eyes are hard with anger, but Arabella? Her usual narrowed eyes and tight lips are replaced by something akin to horror. Her mouth is agape and her eyes bulge as she raises a pointed finger at me.

No, not at me.

The woods.

I whip my head around, expecting to see some frightful creature ready to tear me apart, just as it did the nameless Guardian, but there’s nothing. When a second branch snaps, I take a step back. In the span of a single breath, the stillness turns to chaos and a flurry of animals explode from the trees. Dozens of them thunder towards us, hooves and claws scraping at dry soil and rock. Deer, rabbits, squirrels, boars. They trip over each other in their race to meet our spears, and only a few realize the trap quick enough. Even those that veer to the side likely won’t make it back to the safety of the forest. The Lunar Hunt is a bloodbath and this symphony of death cries will haunt me until the next.

I stumble backwards, tripping over the skirt of my gown, just as the Commander drives his sword into the breast of a doe. Her blood sprays, hot and steaming in the cool night air, and speckles me in a mist of scarlet. A guttural scream comes from somewhere nearby—but not from her. That was a human scream.

A large animal stands atop a downed Guardian, dark fur glistening on its back. *Is that a fucking bear??* His cries turn wet as the creature sinks its teeth into his throat and tears at the flesh with a brutal shake of its head. Blood seeps out around the man, leaving a prominent stain against the shimmering bed of moonlight.

“Wolf!” someone shouts, triggering a melody of shrieks from the people behind me. If that’s a wolf, then it’s the biggest wolf I’ve ever seen.

The sound draws the animal’s attention, and when it looks up from its kill, hot blood drips thickly from its jaws. A low growl emanates from deep in its chest as its searching eyes lock onto its next target.

Me.

It snaps its jaws in warning, daring me to run. Even if I could scramble to my feet in time, there’s no outrunning a wolf. It stalks toward me, its movements slow and decisive. My hands dig at the needle grass and cracked soil as I clamber backwards towards what I hope is the Commander or anyone with a weapon. Wolves rarely leave the forest. They fear us—or they’re supposed to. Clearly someone forgot to tell this one.

The animal crouches low on its haunches, readying to close the distance between us in a single leap. I shut my eyes tight and tilt back my head. Maybe it will be over quickly if I don’t fight. A

painless death is a fair death and what else is there to look forward to? This could be a mercy.

I wait for the pain, but nothing comes.

Something whizzes past my ear, and I hear a muted thunk as the object hits the wolf. Its snarl morphs into a whelp before I hear two more thunks. I open my eyes in time to see the wolf fall; brought down by two arrows in its chest and one through its left eye.

“A life for a life,” a whispered voice says in my ear. I know that voice, but it can’t be him. Marked aren’t permitted to take part in the hunt, never mind speak to royalty. Calloused hands feel soft against my skin as they ease me to my feet, and my heart kicks up faster at his touch.

It’s him.

“Unhand her, Marked!” The Commander charges over, feigning concern for my safety. He should have been close enough to deal with the wolf himself. Out of everyone here, he has the most experience with a sword and the gall to use it. The only thing he doesn’t have is the desire to risk his life for me.

Jade backs away, hands raised in submission and eyes cast downward. Refusing an order will only result in his death, and that’s if the Commander doesn’t execute him simply for touching me. The only thing Marked are good for is reminding the people what happens when you break the law.

The Commander raises his sword. With only a single swing, he could end the life of the man he’s been itching to kill for the last fifteen years. Jade was the first Marked, and that insult still carries weight.

“Stop,” I say, putting as much authority into my voice as I can muster. I’m the first daughter of the king, but my orders often fall on deaf ears. Arabella is the favourite, the chosen heir, and the Commander in particular takes that as an excuse to ignore me whenever he can. He would have much preferred the wolf got me tonight, though he would never openly admit it.

His jaw twitches. “This is all too familiar, Princess. You cannot spare him this time.” His words are slow and deliberate, spoken through clenched teeth.

“He saved my life. He’s broken no law.” My words are for my father, who now stands a few feet away with my sister at his side. There’s uncertainty on his face, and it’s easy to see why. A Marked has used a weapon, touched a princess... but in turn, has saved her life. “Father, please,” I beg. The Commander will not wait forever.

“Sheath your sword, Tobias,” my father orders. The Commander obeys, though the hate in his eyes burns brighter than any flame. “Boy, come here.”

Jade moves forward. He doesn’t dare turn his head to me as he passes, though I can feel his sideways glance. This is the norm for us. Two people connected by the horrors of the past, yet forbidden to acknowledge each other in the present.

Jade drops to his knees at my father’s feet. The blanket of moonlight on his exposed back casts shadows over the criss-crossed scars that dominate the skin. Even time cannot erase the evidence of this lashing. Marked are whipped to near-death and spared only to remind others of the fate of thieves and traitors. Their scars are made to endure. The sight of them now, with Jade once again at my father’s mercy, has my own back burning.

“Who taught you to use a bow?” The question seems innocent enough, but I feel the weight behind it. Wisps of rebellion still linger in the minds of our people, and Jade’s demonstration tonight could be proof of the very thing my father seeks to avoid.

“My uncle, Your Majesty.” Jade doesn’t look up as he answers. Marked are the lowest of the low, and their eyes should not fall upon royalty.

“You have not forgotten after all this time?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

He’s quiet for a long moment. “We could use someone with your talents among the Guardians. Tell me, boy, would you give your life to service?”

I can’t be certain I’d heard him right, and judging by the slight tremble that runs through Jade’s body, he’s just as uncertain. This could be a test or blatant mockery. The king isn’t known for mercy—at least not without a price.

“My life is not mine to give. It would honour me to serve as you see fit.”

“Then it’s settled. Tobias,” my father barks with a snap of his fingers, summoning the Commander to his side. “Find the young man some proper clothes and a place to sleep.”

With swift hands, the Commander grabs Jade by the arms and lurches him to his feet. “What of his status?” The words are little more than a grumble.

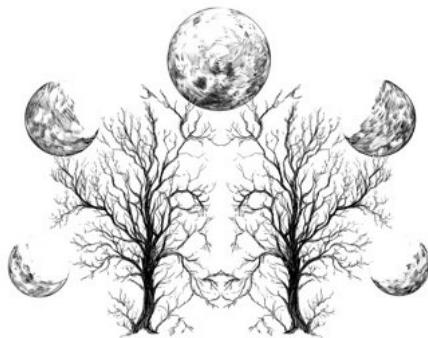
My father turns his gaze to the now silent gathering of onlookers, their wide eyes a perfect display of the shock I feel. “Let this be a lesson to all. Even Marked have the chance at a better life, so long as they prove loyal and useful. This man has saved my daughter and slain a wolf, and for that, I shall reward him. Show him the respect you would show any in my army.”

His words should thrill me, but they have the opposite effect. Sparing Jade is one thing, but enlisting him is something else entirely. My father does nothing without reason, and his reasoning for this remains unclear. He could order the Commander to kill him during training without the risk of turning him into a martyr, or perhaps this is just another way to manipulate our people with the faintest shadow of hope.

What I do know is that Jade is no longer Marked—at least in status. He will return to the palace with us to train with the other Guardians. Our meetings will no longer revolve around the phases of the moon, and the rules separating us will lessen. Finally, after fifteen long years of silence, I may be able to speak with the boy who started it all.

CHAPTER TWO

ABBY



Teagan's hushed voice whispers excitedly as I claim the seat next to her. "Are you okay?" The blazing fire in front of us does little to warm me, but the scraps of meat on my plate surely will. Teagan has been my lady's maid and closest friend since we were children, and there's no one I trust more in this world. "That was him, wasn't it?"

I nod as I politely cut into my venison. The pangs of hunger want to have me tearing into this paltry bit of meat like an animal, but a princess must be composed at all times. I flash a sideways glance to Arabella, who slices her meat with apparent boredom. She's just as hungry as I am, but you wouldn't know it from looking at her. Her pale hair and skin is luminescent in the light of her small fire, and it's times like this where it's easy to see why people believe she's an incarnation of Lunalissa herself. I, on the other hand, look nothing like her with my mousey brown hair and sky-blue eyes.

Arabella is my half sister, and her mother—the queen—was too far gone with her second child to travel to this hunt. She may even deliver before we arrive home. I don't want to think about that now. If she were to have a son, the line of succession would shift again. It's not that I want to rule—because I definitely do not—but it's hard enough to gain my father's approval as it is. Another child in the mix will only further the divide between myself and my family.

The memory of splattered blood flashes through my mind as juice explodes in my mouth. I count to ten, then swallow. One of the many foolish rules of royalty is that we must thoroughly chew our food. Arabella once told me that this was a precaution against an untimely death by choking, but I think it all has to do with appearances. Everything is about appearances in this family.

"You must be reeling," Teagan whisper-yells to me again. "He's a Guardian now!"

"A Guardian in training," I correct, after swallowing another small bite. This is not nearly enough food. The hunt must not have been successful this month, which is fair given the wolf attack. Royal rations are doubled, so I can only imagine how many we'll lose to starvation before the month ends. It feels wrong, given that the very people who will go hungry are the ones working tirelessly to clean, cook, and cure the meat. Under the watchful eyes of the Commander and his lackeys, of course.

"So what? He's going to be living in the palace. What are you going to say to him when you talk to him?"

"If I talk to him."

She rolls her eyes. She wouldn't dare do that in the presence of my father or Arabella, but she knows she can be herself with me. "I know you better than that. You're probably already plotting your escape. Maybe you should go now."

“Go where?” A chill runs down my spine and it has nothing to do with the icy wind blowing against the silver thread of my gown. The Commander always has this effect on me, and it doesn’t help that he moves as silently as a serpent.

“To bed,” I tell him, fully aware that he won’t believe me and not really caring if he doesn’t.

I can just make out the narrowing of his eyes under the silver half-mask he wears, but he doesn’t argue. Snakes in the garden aren’t so bad when you know how to deal with them. “There will be no ignoring your duties, Abilene. The King spared one Marked, but you have a duty to the others.”

Now I want to roll my eyes. I hate when he calls me by my full name, but that loathing doesn’t come close to how I feel about the Marching. Even his timely appearance is intentional. With as much grace as I can muster, I hand my plate to Teagan. She’s been getting too thin, so she could use the extra rations. I could use them too, but why should I have more while others suffer? I’ve lost my appetite anyway, though the pains in my stomach remain.

The Commander leads me away from the cluster of fires to a ragged tent. The fabric is weather-worn and speckled with rips that welcome the biting wind. This tent is the furthest from the warmth of the cooking fires, and even if this wasn’t routine, I would know who sleeps here. When the Commander pulls back the flap, the stench of sweat hits me as if I’ve smacked into an invisible wall. Even without the heat of the fires, there are enough bodies crammed into this space to warm it.

The tent, which would sleep eight comfortably, holds thirty-one people.

No, not thirty-one. Not anymore.

Thirty pairs of eyes stare back at me in the darkness, solemn and resigned. Marked aren’t permitted to look upon royalty—with one exception.

“Greetings, Lady of the Marked,” they say in unison. It takes everything I have in me not to shudder at the title. A title earned because I had the nerve to beg for their lives. To beg for *his* life.

“Greetings, Marked,” I mumble back. None of us enjoy this, except perhaps the Commander. He may even look more forward to this than the promise of a warm meal. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Not so fast,” the Commander holds out an arm to stop me. “First, you must choose one.”

“*For what?*” In all the years I’ve been forced to do this, never have I had to choose a Marked before the Marching. Judging by the apprehensive glances they share with one another, this is the first they’re hearing of it as well.

This is different, and different is dangerous.

“Lunalissa sent that wolf tonight. She chose you for a sacrifice, and because you survived, the hunt was unsuccessful. Your life cost us all, Abilene, so now you must make it right. Choose one to go to the woods in your stead.”

I swallow hard against the sudden aridness of my throat. I knew it was possible some would blame me for the hunt’s failure, but if Lunalissa really meant for me to be a sacrifice, then sending a Marked to their death in my place will fix nothing. This is nothing but a punishment and has little to do with my life being spared.

This is about Jade.

“You can’t ask me to do that.” These people breathe because of me, and even though the life they live now is arguably worse than death, I can’t be the one to end it. I won’t take a life.

“They are your responsibility. You must choose, or perhaps you want to go yourself?” It’s obvious which option he would rather me take.

Before I can argue or call his bluff, one of the Marked moves. It’s subtle—only the slight gesture of placing a hand against his chest, but it’s enough for me to interpret the meaning. The man appears stronger than the other Marked, at least as strong as a Marked can be. The muscles that ripple down

his arms and across his abdomen are thin, but they're there. Memories of his lashing flood back to me, and the words he'd spoken then replay in my mind. I can almost hear him speak them now, though his lips remain still.

'Let me die.'

He'd never wanted this life. Twenty-six Marked came before him, so he knew the fate he'd share.

Perhaps I should have let him die then, but when you have hundreds of people screaming at you to stop an act of cruelty, how can you stay silent? They don't know the cost of a Marked. To them, I'm just the princess with the power of mercy. If I'd refused, I may as well have held the whip myself.

I swallow again and raise a trembling finger. "Him." The word is barely audible on my lips.

"Sacrificing the fittest?" The Commander clicks his tongue as he grabs the man and yanks him from the tent. "Why not put one of the weaker ones out of their misery?"

I shield myself from his words. I may know nothing about the man I'd chosen, but I know that he wants this. Whether he sees it as a way out or if he's doing it to protect the others, it matters not. He made this choice so I wouldn't have to.

We follow the Commander to the edge of the woods. I stop a step behind the chosen man, and the other Marked halt just behind me. They could run if they wanted to, but there's nowhere for them to go. Running would mean starvation. At least with the humiliation this life entails, there's the promise of food.

I've never been this close to the forest before, just mere steps away. Somehow it seems even darker, as if I were staring into the void of a starless night. What cursed creatures lurk just beyond those trees? Very few who enter the woods return. Some villagers who live along the edge of the forest have crossed the line in desperation. Some have even returned with small game like rabbits or ground fowl, but those instances are rare. Not just because of the low survival rate, but because of my father's temper. Close to half of the Marked were deemed deserters when they ventured into the forest in search of food for their families. They were labeled traitors to Lunae and dragged into the city to be whipped in the streets. Their deaths would not only increase the rations for the remaining people, but also provide a fattening meal for the pigs.

I shudder at the thought. I hate everything about this. The Marked, the desperation of our people, and especially my father's way of dealing with it. There is so much wrong in the world, but what else can be done? The kingdom along the Jade Coast was long since destroyed by a great wave. There may be civilizations across the mountains, but one would have to pass through the Gods' domain. The mountains are forbidden to mortals, and it's said that nothing lives beyond our shores. That land once belonged to the dragons, and all that remains now is bone and ash.

The Commander shoves the chosen man forward, his exposed back gleaming in the moonlight. None of the Marked are permitted to cover their scars—not even the women, though many of them tie a thin strap of cloth over their breasts. A few don't, and I've often wondered if it's because it acts as a deterrent to unwanted stares. Even men avert their eyes because it's considered shameful to have relations with a Marked. If that's why they do it, more power to them. I know what it's like to have all eyes on me. To compare myself to the Marked is probably unfair. They will always have it worse than I do, but we're more alike than anyone realizes.

The man keeps his head high and shoulders squared as he begins his march to the forest. His *final* march. I suddenly become sickeningly aware that I don't know his name, and that's wholly unacceptable. This man is sacrificing himself not only for the other Marked, but also for me, so the least I can do is learn his name.

"Wait," I call after him. He hesitates, but doesn't turn to me. Perhaps he isn't as composed as he

seems, or, just as likely, he doesn't know how to react to my command. Save for the customary greeting, I'm not supposed to speak to the Marked, just as they aren't supposed to speak to me. "Tell me your name."

A long moment passes where silent air hangs heavy. Who am I to request something from him now? This is my fault. His blood will be on my hands, and there isn't a person here who isn't thinking it.

"Merrick," he says, just before he's swallowed by the looming darkness between shadowy trees.



The rest of the evening goes as it always does. Under the Commander's watchful eye, I parade the Marked around the edge of camp in a wide circle. The Commander walks with us, though all too close for anyone's liking. We time our pace to the crack of his whip. I asked my father once why we do this, and he said it was a reminder to both the Marked and the people what happens when they step out of line. I think it's much more than that. This is cruelty for the sake of cruelty, and I think we do it because the Commander enjoys it. This wouldn't be the first time he's manipulated my father.

It's nearly impossible to stop myself from flinching with each crack, and I don't need to look behind me to know the Marked share the same tendency. The sound likely does more to them than it does to me, but that doesn't mean I'm unaffected.

I notice Arabella still seated by the fire where I'd left her. Her eyes meet mine for only a fraction of a second before she brushes a lock of pale blond hair behind an ear as an excuse to look away. She really is the embodiment of moonlight, with her pale skin and almost silver hair.

I gaze around the cluster of fires in search of one face in particular. From what I can tell, Jade isn't with the other Guardians. He'd likely been given his own ragged tent and left to his own devices. He'll be lucky if someone remembers to offer him a plate of food since he won't be eating with the Marked tonight.

Despite that, I can't help the wave of disappointment that washes over me in his absence. This is the first Marching he hasn't been forced to take part in, and I can't blame him for wanting to keep his distance. Still, his presence was the only thing that ever made this bearable. No matter where he stood among the Marked when the Marching began, he'd end it only steps behind me. Perhaps it had always been a fantasy. I'm a princess and he's a Marked—or at least he was. There was never even the faintest breath of a future for us. All we ever had was the Marching on this night, bathed in the light of a poison moon.

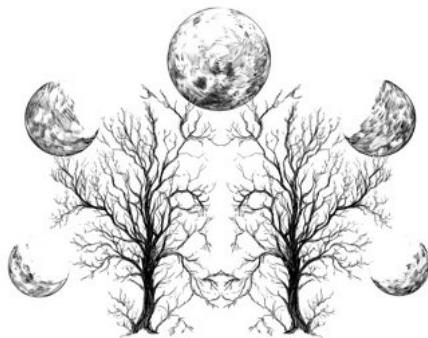
I can't be sure what has my head turning away from the circle of fires and gazing off into the dimness. It might have been movement or the feeling of eyes on me, but whatever it is, I'm grateful because my eyes find Jade. Marching with us—with me—just far enough away to be but a ghost in the night. If anyone cared enough to look past me and the line of Marked, they'd probably miss him altogether. But that doesn't matter. His part in this now isn't for them.

I breathe a sigh of relief at seeing him there, back no longer exposed to the moon. The shirt he wears is tattered, but the fact that he has a shirt means everything. He's a person again. The first Marked, and the first to be freed from that title. With that comes freedom from the law, too. No longer does he have to keep his head down in my presence, nor are his eyes forced to steal only wavering glances in my direction.

No. Tonight, on this Marching, Jade looks at me and I look at him—and soon enough, the repetitive cracking of the whip is replaced by the beating of my own heart.

CHAPTER THREE

ABBY



Crack.

The man has long since stopped screaming, but still the lashes come.

Crack.

His back is flayed, and his once golden skin has turned wet with scarlet.

Crack.

Very few in the crowd still watch. They were forced to be present for this just as I was, though this is nothing new to them. When they look away, the image will still haunt them.

This is my first time watching an execution. I've seen only seven winters, and would have happily gone a hundred more without witnessing this.

The Commander lowers the whip and at the snap of his fingers, two Guardians cut the man down. He's limp in their arms, and I know without the faintest doubt that he's dead. Even without the immense blood and sobs from the crowd, I would know this is what death looks like.

"Bring the boy," the Commander barks over gasps and quiet murmurs of objection. I watch in horror as a young boy—possibly the dead man's son, judging by his tanned skin, sand coloured hair, and sea-green eyes—is pulled from the gathering. These are people of the Jade Coast, possibly from one of the small seaside villages or Marein itself. We don't have many Sealanders here, but their heritage is not the reason for this brutality.

"You can't do this," a woman from the crowd pleads as one of the Guardians ties the boy's hands to the post, high above his head. He's almost too small, and he needs to stand on the tips of his toes in order to keep from pulling his shoulders from their sockets. He can't be much older than me, and seeing him on the post, which is still slick with the dead man's blood, has me envisioning myself there.

The Commander ignores the cries of protest. No one dares interfere because they, too, would be labeled traitors to the Crown and find themselves next on the pole. I know what many of them are thinking. This boy's death means one less mouth to feed, and food has become so scarce in recent months. His death could mean another's survival, and that's what makes this acceptable. Better another's child than your own.

"What's your name, boy?" the Commander asks once he's secured. The whip in his hand twitches, but not in fear or reluctance. The Commander looks *excited*.

"J-Jade," the boy stammers. His head turns toward the dead man's body, and the wetness of his eyes brings out the striking green in them. I want to look away or flee, but the Guardian holding my arms would never allow it. My father has decreed that I must watch this, and so I have no choice.

“Do you know why you have been sentenced to death?”

“I was hungry.”

“We are all hungry, but most know better than to steal.”

So that’s it. The family weren’t traitors or murderers. They were just hungry, and for that reason alone, they will die. First the father, and now the son.

Crack.

The first lash comes swiftly, and the boy’s shriek makes my stomach twist violently. I didn’t feel the sting of the whip, but by my body’s reaction, I may as well have. If there was any food in my belly at all, I’d be at risk of having it come back up.

Crack.

The Commander shows no mercy as he brings the biting leather down again and again. I no longer hear the lashes or the boy’s wails over the ringing in my ears. This is wrong. These are our people —*my people*.

“Stop,” I say. Or, at least I think I say it. My mouth moves, but I hear no sound so I try again. “Stop!”

The hands on my arms tighten. “It will be over soon,” the Guardian whispers in my ear. He doesn’t seem to be enjoying this either.

“No, no, no. Commander!” I elbow the Guardian in what must have been a sensitive area, because he lets go of me with a forceful huff. I dart into the square before anyone can stop me and skid to a halt between the boy and his executioner.

“This is no place for you, Abilene,” the Commander says, wiping droplets of splattered blood from his brow with the back of his hand. “This boy is a thief.”

“This boy is hungry. Release him at once.” I try to sound like my sister, but my voice is too young and small. Arabella might be younger than I, but her voice holds the force of a queen.

“The King would never allow it.”

“Commander,” my father’s voice booms from somewhere nearby. The crowd parts in bewilderment as he passes through them, flanked by four Guardians. “Do not presume to declare what I would or would not do.” His eyes flick to me. “Come here, daughter.”

I obey, because he is my king as much as he is my father. He bends down so that he’s at eye level with me, waiting for me to speak. “Please show the boy mercy.”

His response is so low that only I can hear. “I cannot. Times are hard, and the people are unhappy. They need to see what happens to criminals, otherwise they’ll all turn to thievery and far worse than that.”

I flinch as another scream fills the air. The sudden lash has me pushing away from my father and planting myself in front of the Commander again. “I said stop!”

The Commander makes a sound of annoyance. “Your Highness, perhaps she should be removed —”

“Make an example out of him,” I say, the words coming in a flurry. “A *living* example.” The two men stare at me in confounded anger, so I jump into a hurried explanation. This is my only chance. Any moment someone will drag me back to the palace. “Look at his back. He will forever be marked. Don’t you think this child’s back will be a better reminder of what happens to thieves than killing him now? He will disappear from memory, just as that man will. Unless you allow him to live to serve a purpose.” I point to the dead man on the ground, doing everything I can to still the tremor in my outstretched arm.

“This is why a girl has no place at an execution,” the Commander scoffs. “May I resume the

lashing, Your Majesty?"

My father is silent for a long moment, as if lost in deep thought. "You may not," he says finally. "Cut him down."

The Commander grumbles in protest, but does as he's ordered. He pulls his sword from its sheath and slices clean through the rope. The boy—Jade, I think his name was—falls hard to the stone ground in a heap of crumpled limbs. Blood oozes from his flayed back and spreads around him in a wide crimson circle. If not for his ragged breaths and the trembling of his body, I'd think it already too late. Even still, it might very well be.

I crouch down beside him, slipping off the floral scarf that held back my hair and press it against his wounds. This will do nothing to stop the bleeding, but it's all I can do until someone else comes to his aid. His hand finds mine, and he squeezes as if doing so will somehow free him from his pain.

"You're safe now," I promise him, and hope beyond hope that I'm right.



I awake with a start, the sound of the crowd's murmured voices still lingering in my mind while the haze of sleep fights to clear. '*Abilene, the Merciful,*' they call me, and the ghostly words have me shuddering more than the frigid breeze blowing through the open tent flap.

That dream has haunted me for nearly fifteen years, and I suspect it will never fade. Most nights I can avoid it by having Teagan sleep in my chambers, but even that proves ineffective after a Marching. Things would be so different now if I'd let Jade die that day, and a small part of me wonders if it would've been better. Marked live only the shadow of a life—in poverty and humiliation. Some look to me with hatred in their eyes, which is far better than those who still see me as their saviour.

The journey home is long. The carriage jostles with every bump in the uneven road as our tired horses struggle to pull us up the incline that will eventually lead us to Lunae's main city district. Arabella and I ride in one of two carriages, while our father rides in the other. The Commander has a horse of his own, as do two other high-ranking Guardians, but aside from them, everyone else must walk.

At one time, our kingdom flourished and our farms were bursting with livestock, but just as it's become hard to feed ourselves, it's harder still to feed the animals. We're down to only a dozen horses now, and if we lose them before we can breed more, the Lunar Hunt will become even more challenging.

Looking to distract myself from the thought, I pull back the sheer silver curtain for the fourth time and peer out through the open window. I can only just make out the palace in the distance, sunlight making the moonstone glisten. To some, the palace must seem beautiful with its enormous white walls and shimmering towers that spread ripples of reflected light over the land below. To me, it's nothing but monstrous. A prison from which I will never escape, heir to the throne or not.

"You won't see him," Arabella says, not bothering to look up from her embroidery. I don't know how she does that for hours on end. I would grow tired of the minuscule task in minutes. When my stepmother tried to teach me to sew, I'd only attended three classes before she told my father to have a maid instruct me because she was done. He never did burden the staff with me.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” It’s a feeble lie, but I won’t give her the satisfaction of catching me. It’s not that I thought I was being subtle, but this is none of her business.

She sets down her embroidery this time, giving me my first clear view of it. Our palace home with a striking full moon taking up much of the lapis sky behind it. Arabella loves our home, and she worships the moon more than anyone. More than even our father. It’s narcissistic, really, considering that she’s been raised to think of herself as a mortal God.

“I’m no fool. I’ve seen the way you look at him. He’s no good for you, Abilene. Stick to bedding Guardians.”

Indignation flashes through me. I’d long ago given up asking her to call me Abby because the request only ever made it worse. It’s easier to just ignore her, though the name still irritates me. “Last I checked,” I say through tight lips, “he’s a Guardian now too.”

She rolls her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“Is this jealousy, or are you just vexed he saved me from that wolf?”

She blanches, and despite herself, her expression softens. “You’re my sister. Do you really think I wish you dead?”

“You knew it would happen. I know you saw it.” Arabella has had visions since she was a child. Not quite visions of the future, but dreams with elements that sometimes come to pass. She claimed they were messages from Lunalissa herself, hints and instructions to better serve the Goddess. I can’t say I believe that, but I can’t deny her dreams either. I just don’t believe that they should be allowed to govern as if they were set in stone.

“I didn’t know it was you the wolf came for. When I realized...” She trails off, either unable or unwilling to finish the thought.

“That shouldn’t have mattered. You have a gift, and you should have used it to warn us. A man died last night because of you.” That may have been a bit harsh. Even if we’d known about the wolf, there’s no guarantee everyone would have survived.

“Lunalissa demands sacrifice.” And just like that, all regret melts away. Someone died, and that’s all she can say? She’s like my father in that way. The common people are less than human to them. They see themselves as close to Godly, and a death here and there is of no concern to them.

“She gets a pig,” I grumble. There’s so much more I want to say, but fighting with Arabella about this is a waste of breath.

“You know as well as I do the pig is not for her.”

The pig is for the people, just another part of the show. If there was ever a time that not one animal came from the forest, at least we would have the pig to serve as a distraction. We would leave the people with a meal while we slipped away in the night to return to the safety of the palace, for the next morning when people awoke with empty bellies and no food to ration, the rebellion would surely begin.

I read between the lines of her words. “You fear my survival will displease Lunalissa? Sister or not, you think I should have died. Did you know the Commander forced me to send an innocent Marked to the woods last night?”

“The Marked aren’t innocent, and your obsession with that boy—”

“He has nothing to do with this.” Anger flares in me again.

“He has everything to do with it.”

“Have you seen something about him? In your visions?”

She purses her lips. “No.”

“Then keep your opinions to yourself.”

She returns to her embroidery with a shrug, no longer interested in this conversation, and I resume my staring out the window—very much not looking for Jade.



I flop back on my bed, cushioned by lush blankets that I've more than once wished I could trade for a hot meal. I press one of the many silver-threaded pillows into my face and groan into it.

"Why don't you just go?" Teagan asks with a musical laugh that matches the song she'd been singing while she tidied my bedchambers. She knows me better than anyone, and if the random sounds I make were a language all their own, she would be the only person fluent in it.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say into the pillow. I know exactly what she's talking about, and she knows I know it.

"You can fight it all you want, but you're only delaying the inevitable. Even if he wasn't here, you're overdue for a breakout."

She's not wrong about that. There's only so much you can do inside a palace without drowning in boredom. It's not like I have friends here, except for Teagan, and we're too old to play as children. Even the staff rarely speak to me. I'm lucky if I get a, 'yes, my lady,' or, 'no, my lady,' but fuck that. Empty words do nothing to satisfy my need for personal connection, and Teagan can only give me so much. I can tell she's growing annoyed with my incessant moping now, but I'd be surprised if she said anything. Encouraging me to make a break for it is usually where she stops. We've been back only a few hours, and already I must be driving her mad.

"The sun is still up," I reason. "The Guardians will catch me the second I cross the wall."

"The sun will set, and by then you will have thought of another excuse."

With another groan, I hurl the pillow at her. She catches it with ease, as if she'd expected this reaction—which she probably did.

"I think Jade is from the coast," I muse after a moment.

Teagan nods in agreement. "He does look that way. We could be cousins."

"What do you remember about it? Before..." I can't finish the question. Teagan has never shown any interest in talking about the massive wave of water that destroyed her home. Many children were orphaned that day—she included—and were brought here to serve. My father called it a mercy, but I'm not sure I agree. The children could have been adopted rather than placed into work camps and taught to serve the royal family. They're paid only in food and board, and will never be free from this life. When they grow too old or sick to work, I shudder to think what will happen then.

"Not much. I know I liked the feel of sun-warmed sand and the scent of the ocean, but I've forgotten exactly what that felt like." Her faint Sealand accent seems thicker now than it ever has before, as if trying to remember her home has unlocked the original cadence of her voice. "Jade may not remember either, if that is why you're asking."

"I don't know why I'm asking," I say with a sigh. Just as Terranous abandoned this land to blight, Tideus sent a wave of water to eradicate the Sealanders. The Gods are angry with us, and have been for some time. Some would say only Lunalissa blesses us now, but if that were true, wouldn't she send enough food?

"Well, whatever it is, you should ask him."

I sit up to face her. "You're just trying to get rid of me."

“Of course. When else do I get the room to myself?”

I laugh at that. “Big plans?”

“I’m going to have a nap in your bed and use all the pillows. Every. Single. One.”

I gaze around at the many pillows atop the bed. “Even I don’t use all of the pillows. There’s just too many.”

“I’ll find a way,” she shrugs. “Now you get out of here.”

I raise a brow in mocking question. “Is that an order?”

She moves to the window and drapes the shimmering silver curtain around herself. “It is. I am Princess Abilene and I command you to go talk to that man.” Her impersonation of me is ridiculous at best and way over the top. I don’t think I’ve ever sounded as snooty as that.

“You do that better than I do.” Perhaps Teagan would make a better royal than me. I don’t seem to have it in me to order people around the way my family does. Why does being born in a palace make us better than those born in a shack?

“Don’t take it personally. I’m just used to your sister yelling at me for one thing or another.”

“Well, it’s very convincing.”

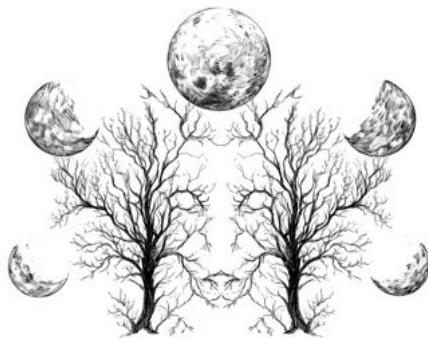
“So you’ll go?” Her voice is sickeningly hopeful, and I don’t want to disappoint her.

I let out a long sigh. “I’ll go to the garden and think about it.”

She squeals in excitement. “That’s all I ask.” She sprints toward me and dives on the bed, burying her face into a pillow. “Now leave me alone with my bed.”

CHAPTER FOUR

ABBY



The garden is not much of a garden at all, though I imagine it would be beautiful if our land wasn't spoiled. This was once an empty courtyard on one of the upper floors used only to pass from one side of the palace to the other. In Lunae, when a person of royal blood reaches the age of their maturity, they're given a gift of considerable value. I could have asked for anything, but what I wanted most was this courtyard converted into a garden.

Very little grows here, just as with our land, but tending to pale sprigs of grass and low shrubbery gives me hope that whatever curse plagues us will one day be lifted and that I will be the first to see it. Every time I come here, I imagine that I'll walk into a new world. The needle-grass will be gone, and in its place will be a sea of flowers. Not just the yellow and orange blossoms I have a vague memory of, but flowers in every shape, size, and colour imaginable.

Arabella thinks me foolish for spending so much time here, and perhaps she's right, but I have another reason for loving this place. I move to the stone bench that lines the parapet that looks out over the palace grounds. From here, I can see over the towering wall that keeps me imprisoned—or tries to—and look out over the city.

I focus my attention on the ring where the Guardians train. There's enough light still to see the men swinging swords at each other. The Commander is there berating some poor Guardian who probably did nothing wrong. I'm too far away to hear their words, but I can see enough to know this man is not Jade.

It takes some time, but eventually I find him away from the others on the far side of the training grounds. I may be six floors up, but I know it's him. His sand-coloured hair stands out, almost glowing in the subdued light of the setting sun. He's the only Sealand Guard that I know of, but even if that weren't the case, his aim with a bow would have given him away.

It's difficult to see, especially as the pink and yellow sky turns darker and the light of day dissolves into night, but his aim appears true with every shot he fires at the target. So true, in fact, that I can't even blame my father for his suspicions. Jade has been Marked for fifteen years, and in all that time he would have been forbidden to touch a weapon. Even if the scrawny boy from my dreams and memory had such skill, how could he still?

One by one, the Guardians leave the grounds. Some will be on duty tonight and leave to claim their posts in the city or along the wall, while others will be retiring to their tents for a night of drinking. Lunae may not have much in the way of food, but we're not short on spirits. Before long, only Jade remains, never seeming to tire of firing his bow and walking the twenty-five paces to reclaim his arrows.

I let out a long, heavy sigh. If I'm to make a move to speak to Jade, this is the time. It shouldn't be this hard. I've sneaked out of the palace more times now than I can count, and most of those times were to spring myself on unsuspecting Guardians. Though, in all of those instances, I'd worn a disguise. Some may have wondered if the woman they'd lain with was not who she said she was, but most didn't care. Besides, they had enough evidence to ignore their suspicions. One look or touch of my back and any doubts of my common blood would have been washed away.

"You're braver than this," I chide myself as I stand from my perch on the bench. The sky has become a dark purple-grey, and the waning moon is half visible over the mountains. In just a few minutes, it will be dark enough. I step up on the stone bench and swing a leg over the wall. There is a small ledge on the opposite side that only I seem to know about. I carefully scale it, taking only minuscule steps until I reach the far side, where it nearly connects with the outer palace wall.

With a quick filling of my lungs, I leap from one wall to the next and pull myself up. My landing isn't as graceful as it would have been if I were wearing my usual pants, but I handled it pretty well in a dress. I don't know why I never thought to change. Perhaps on a subconscious level, I thought it would keep me from going through with this, but knowing Jade is down there alone is all too tempting. Even just a moment with him would be worth needing to explain away a ruined dress come morning.

I keep low as I scurry along the wall. This area is sometimes patrolled, but so rarely that my need to keep to the shadows is probably unnecessary. Still, this is not the night to be caught. I move to the spot I know has the shortest drop. The land below is uneven, and a small incline creeps upwards. It's still a fair distance, but not one that would cause anything more than a broken ankle if one was to mess up the landing.

"Don't mess up the landing," I tell myself, as I always do, before kicking off my shoes and tossing them over. I pull in a quick breath of air and jump.

I land with a soft thud and only a dull aching in my knees. Most of the time I barely feel the landing at all, but I'm unbalanced with so much fabric covering me. I should have switched clothing with Teagan, but at least I got through the hard part with no real damage.

I slip my shoes back on and move around the edge of the training ring, keeping to the shadow of the wall. When I hear voices, I press my back against it and pray I'm not noticed.

"Are you sure it was Gregory?" one Guardian says to another. I can tell they've been drinking by the slight slurring of their words. Neither of them is on duty, and they're likely just moving from one secluded place to another to continue their night of indulgences.

"Aye. No one has seen him for three days."

So they've identified the nameless Guardian who met a terrible fate. Nothing will be done for him, of course. Lunae has held nothing that resembles a proper funeral since before even my mother died. She doesn't even have a grave I can visit.

"Do we know what got him? He shouldn't have been at the border. I suppose he could have been deserting, but that doesn't sound like Gregory."

"Isn't it obvious? The monster took him."

The second Guardian groans loudly. "Not this again."

"I'm telling you, I saw it! It was perched atop the stables and had massive wings. It was probably after the horses."

"An ordinary beast of fang and claw killed Gregory. Nothing more. You're going to get yourself into trouble spouting that nonsense."

"Then what did I see?"

I don't hear the answer to that question because the two men move out of earshot, so I continue my way along the wall. I'm sure this is where I'd seen Jade, but now that I've arrived, the space is empty. It's possible I've made a wrong turn. Everything looks so different when you're six floors up, but I'm certain I've gotten this right. Unless my timing is just so bad that I missed him...

My breath and my thoughts are cut short when I turn to find him only steps behind me. He'd been silent in his approach, which means I must not have been. "Jade," I breathe his name.

His striking green eyes study me with cool precision, like a hunter analyzing prey. "Abilene," he says in greeting. "I don't think you belong on this side of the wall." No 'princess' or 'my lady.'

"It's Abby," I tell him sheepishly, and the sting of disappointment is sharp. I thought he'd be happier to see me. After all, this is the first moment we've ever had alone together. I can't have read this wrong. Not after all those years of distant intimacy.

He moves closer until we're mere inches apart. I can smell the jerkiness on his breath, but no hint of the spirits that Guardians usually reek of. "Go back to your palace, Abby."

The sting swells with another piercing jab to my heart, as if it's balancing the weight of a thousand silver coins. I've never sensed hostility from him before, so why now? He's no longer Marked. Could that have changed the unspoken bond between us so quickly?

He moves to turn from me, but I grab his arm without thinking. "Don't walk away from me," I hiss. "Don't you want me?"

The blood drains from my face the instant the words leave my mouth. Those aren't the words I'd meant to say. I'd wanted to ask if I meant so little to him, or if I'd been wrong about his feelings towards me and the bond we share. I don't amend my phrasing, because this too is something I want to know.

I tighten my grip on his arm as if that could stop him from leaving me if he wanted to. He stands stone still, the hard green of his eyes liquifying.

I open my mouth to speak his name again and demand an answer, but there's no time for that. In half a heartbeat, his lips are on mine and his tongue invades the small space of my mouth. The force of his onslaught sends me backwards until I feel myself press against the stone wall I'd scaled only minutes ago. The breath leaves my lungs and I feel as if they've given up the ability to take in air altogether—which is entirely fine by me. To breathe would mean his mouth would have to leave mine, and that is utterly unacceptable.

He pulls away from me all too soon, though his lips linger only just above mine. "I can't want what's already mine."

Every inch of him presses up against every inch of me. A hand finds its way under the skirt of my dress and squeezes greedily at my backside. His teeth drag across the skin of my neck, sending a chill rippling through me. That must stir something in him too, because he groans softly in my ear.

"Then take me." I can barely get the words out between small gasps, and it takes every bit of concentration I can muster to free him from his pants so that he doesn't have to release me. He hesitates only a moment, his eyes asking silent questions I recognize all too well. This isn't the first time I've done this, and it won't be the last. Not now that Jade is here.

His tongue penetrates my mouth again the instant he penetrates me. I wrap my legs around him, giving myself over to it. With each demanding thrust, my insides turn to liquid warmth as one hunger replaces another. I can no longer feel the gnawing in my stomach, as one much lower takes precedent. I've wanted this man ever since I was old enough to know what wanting him meant, and now that I have him, I have no intention of letting go.

The heat within me grows white hot, and he has to press a hand to my mouth to stifle the sounds of

my release. His follows only seconds later, his face pressing firmly into my breasts. We stay like that for a long moment, breathing heavily into each other, but all too soon he sets me back down on my feet. My chest heaves and my legs feel shaky with the aftershocks of pleasure still coursing through me. His eyes are hard on mine as he cleans himself up with a rag. He may not be on duty, but if another Guardian saw him in this state, there would be questions. Judging by his expression, that's the last thing on his mind.

"Did we really just do that?" he asks, his voice low and even. The disbelief is understandable. A Marked and a princess together was an impossibility that not even the Gods should have been able to rectify. Either we've just done something terribly wrong or so wildly right.

"It was long overdue, I think."

He nods, though it seems more than general agreement. His thoughts are elsewhere; likely on the past and all the small moments that brought us here. Me saving his life, him saving mine, and all the monthly Marchings in between. If anything was ever to be written in the stars, it was this. My heart has never beat for the men who came before him, and it will never beat for anyone who comes after.

If anyone comes after.

"I was worried you wouldn't recognize me with a shirt on."

That has me laughing vehemently enough that he has to press a soft finger over my lips in a reminder to be quiet. If anyone catches us...

His lips find mine again, far softer this time, though still full of a hunger I know only I can satisfy. I feel it too, and would gladly trade the next week of rations if it meant that I didn't have to leave him now.

"You should get back," he sighs before I can. His eyes move up the wall at my back as if searching for a way up.

I place a hand on his cheek to bring his attention back to me. "Not that way." I clutch his hand in mine and lead him around the corner to one of the many Guardian posts that surround the palace. His grip tightens a fraction when he realizes where I'm leading him. "It's alright. He's a friend."

"Lady Abby," Porter greets me when I pop my head through the open space above the half doorway. His blue eyes sparkle in the soft moonlight as his bushy white moustache twitches upward in a hidden smile. Porter is always smiling, even if you can't see it. "You've been back only a day and already you're out on an evening stroll?"

"I had some business to attend to." There's no hiding the flush still on my cheeks, but Porter won't judge me for it. He already knows of my occasional outings and what sometimes occurs during them. I tug gently at Jade's arm until he joins me at the window.

"Ah, the Marked Guardian. I've heard all about you. How are you settling into your new life? It must be quite the change."

Jade's eyes flash to me before he answers the man. "I certainly can't complain."

Porter's chuckle is boisterous and, as always, has a way of making me laugh with him. "You're so much like your mother, Lady Abby. She was not made to be kept behind palace walls, either."

Porter is the only Guardian who calls me Abby. I'd rather he left 'Lady' out of it, but it's a fair compromise, nonetheless. He's also the only Guardian—or person, for that matter—who still speaks of my mother. Even Father seems to have all but forgotten her now. It's odd that I would be the one to cling to her memory when I myself have no memory of her.

"I wanted to ask you a favour," I say after letting the thoughts of my mother drift off.

"Anything for you," Porter promises before even hearing what I have to ask.

"I don't trust the Commander not to... I mean..." I should have planned my request ahead of time

so I wouldn't be struggling for words now. I look to Jade for help, but he clearly has no idea where I'm going with this.

"You're worried for him because Tobias is not one to let his prey get away."

That's it exactly. The Commander hates the fact that Marked are allowed to live at all, and now that Jade has been spared entirely? I'm expecting some manner of retaliation. "Will you watch out for him when I can't?"

"I'll do you one better." Porter's gaze slides to Jade. "How would you like to be my apprentice?"

Jade shifts as if uncomfortable, and I wonder if it's because he hasn't been able to make a decision for himself since childhood. "What would that entail?"

Porter chuckles again. "Well, most of the time we just sit here and make sure no one attacks the palace. Occasionally, we let an adventurous princess back within the walls. You're young, so if you're not content to sit, you can train. I'm still handy with a sword, so I may have a few things to teach."

"Yes," Jade answers without hesitation. "Please, yes."

"Well then, it's settled. We can start by getting a certain princess back where she's supposed to be." Porter unlocks the heavy door behind him that leads into a narrow tunnel system. Normally, he'd wait by the door until I was safely inside, but instead he steps out of the small wooden building to give me a moment alone with Jade. I'm thankful for it, because the less he sees, the better. He could get into enough trouble if anyone knew he regularly helped me, but witnessing an interaction such as this would put him in substantial danger.

"Stay away from the Commander," I tell Jade once we're alone. "Don't do anything to provoke him."

"You don't have to worry about me anymore. I'm a free man."

"You've traded one form of service for another. There's more food and clothes, but—"

He cuts me off with the soft press of his lips against mine. "I have everything I need right here." His firm hands snake around my waist as he pulls me into him. It's a cool night, but his skin feels as if he's been standing in sunlight.

"I'll try to visit again soon."

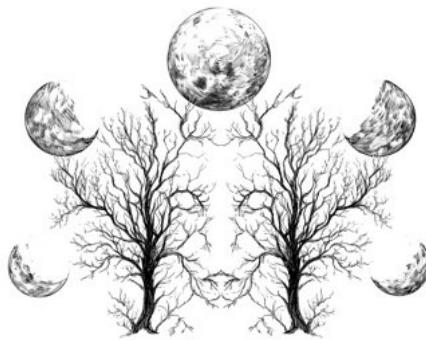
"We have the rest of our lives." He brushes a lock of my hair behind my ear and then trails the backs of his fingers down my cheek. "Don't take unnecessary risks for me. I'm not going anywhere."

"I'd come after you if you did."

He smiles a crooked smile, and I realize then that this is the first time I've ever seen it. Marked don't have much cause to smile, and we've had other things on our minds tonight. But now, with the soft backing of a moonlit sky, I can't imagine anything I'd rather see.

CHAPTER FIVE

ABBY



*I*waste no time dashing back to my room. I'd explored every inch of these tunnels in childhood after running from my assigned caregivers and giving them attacks of the heart at my disappearance. There's no time for childish exploration tonight, not that I feel the urge. Boredom and loneliness fuelled my childhood expeditions through the dark. I would talk to myself for hours down here, just to hear the echoes of my voice and pretend it was someone else. Sometimes, I could almost swear that someone really did answer back.

My stomach twists in on itself, and for the first time I wonder why people call this sensation 'butterflies' when it feels more like a swarm of tiny dragons setting my heart ablaze. Teagan will lose her mind when I tell her about this.

"Teagan!" I whisper-yell after throwing open my bedchamber door. The room is blanketed in darkness. Not a single candle is lit, so I have to take careful steps once the light of the torch-lit hall can no longer reach me.

Something soft trips me. I pick the item up and toss it gently in my hands, a sly smile creeping across my face when I realize it's one of the many pillows from my bed. "What happened to using all the pillows?"

There's no answer. Teagan must be in a deep sleep, cocooned in my blankets. I sprint the rest of the way to the bed, nearly tripping on another pillow in the process. I leap just before where I know the edge of the bed to be, and hope my muscle memory isn't wrong. My eyes are adjusting to the darkness, but not quickly enough to see things clearly. When I land atop it, I find the bed to be empty. The blankets are tangled in a heap and pillows are strewn about as if there was a struggle.

"Teagan?" I call, a nervous quaver in my voice. This could be a joke. She's probably hiding behind the curtains, meaning to frighten me. "This isn't funny."

A hand slips over my mouth from behind, and the grip is far too tight to be my friend. A scream rips through me, but what comes out is muffled. The arm around my waist is as strong as the scent of alcohol and body odour that wafts over me. "Where have you been, Princess?"

The Commander. He slurs his words, but I'm sure it's him.

I struggle against his grasp and fight to get words around the gag of his hand. "What is the meaning of this?!" Either he can't understand me or can't be bothered to answer because he pulls me from the room and ushers me down the sparsely lit corridor.

My heart thunders in my chest. The joyous flight of tiny dragons becomes panicked, and the euphoria turns to nausea—though I suppose that could also be because of the smell of my captor. "Wait until my father hears about this," I threaten into his gloved hand.

The threat proves meaningless when we come to a stop outside the throne room, and the Commander pounds a fist against the white stone door. The answer comes immediately, my father's booming voice echoing through the hall. "Enter!"

The double doors swing wide seemingly on their own accord, though I know a Guardian will be behind each of them. When we enter the room, my eyes quickly find my father seated on his moonstone throne. Beside him, on a smaller throne that doesn't glisten, is my stepmother with a small bundle in her arms. She looks uncomfortable, both physically and emotionally, as if she too had been dragged here against her will, and likely from her birthing bed given the exhaustion in her eyes.

So this is why the Commander dragged me here. It was bad timing on my part to sneak out of the palace on the very night my half-sibling was born. The Commander releases me with force as if he'd hoped I would fall to my knees. Unfortunately for him, scaling the wall for all these years has greatly improved my balance.

"If you wanted to bring me here to meet my new sibling, all you had to do was ask." I scowl at the Commander, who has moved to stand at the king's side.

"You were not in your room," my father answers. "Tell me, why was your maid asleep in your bed?" His voice is calm and even, but there's an edge to it. Sharper even than the Commander's sword. There's no telling how much he knows, but I'd be crazy to admit to anything involving the newest Guardian.

"I asked her to sleep there. My nightmares have returned, and having a warm body beside me helps. I stepped out to get some air." It's not a lie. Not entirely, anyway. I do occasionally ask Teagan to share the bed with me when my nightmares are at their worst. Even when we don't share a bed, she sleeps in my room nearly every night.

"Maids sleep on pallets." Something about his tone has me anxious. If this was just about the baby, he wouldn't be so focused on Teagan. She means nothing to him.

"Where is she?" I have to work to sound only mildly interested. Anything more than that might spark him into doing something drastic, like reassigning her. I can't imagine a single day without her songs drifting through the rooms of my chambers.

His midnight black eyebrows lift in feigned surprise. "You mean to tell me you care more about a serving girl than you do your new sibling?"

Clearly my disinterest isn't fooling anyone, so I change tactics and slide my eyes to the queen, bowing my head slightly. "You have a beautiful baby, Your Highness."

"I have a beautiful son." She drags a long, curved fingernail down the length of the bundle.

Son. So the line of succession has changed again. All in one night, Arabella was stripped from her crown just as her birth had robbed me of mine. I have to swallow hard against the sudden lump in my throat. When words don't immediately form, I drop to my knees to kneel before the infant heir. Anything less might be seen as a denial of the child's birthright, and with the tension in the room tonight, I am not about to test that.

"A perfect future king," I mutter just loud enough for them to hear. "I hope you are well, StepMother." Though the queen is a poor choice, I could use an ally tonight. Perhaps appealing to her motherly side might win me some temporary favour and lessen whatever punishment awaits my transgression.

"I would be better if I were not dragged here in the middle of the night for you, *stepdaughter*." She says the word with venom, as if I were nothing but a burden to her. A curse, even. Even with her wild blood-red hair and violet eyes, I would not go as far as to compare her to children's stories of evil stepmothers. Even still, Imelda has never liked me. I thought once that my father would see her

lack of affection towards me and choose another wife, but he seems not to care. Once she had a daughter of her own, she only spoke to me when she had to.

“Surely this could have waited until morning, Father. Her Majesty needs rest and—”

“Perhaps you should have thought of that before you left your bedchambers.” He snaps his fingers, and a Guardian ushers a person into the room in the same manner the Commander had ushered me. At first, I think it’s Jade, and my heart thumps erratically as my mind runs through endless possibilities. Would my father execute him for this?

My heart slows only a moment when the person is forced to their knees in front of the king. It’s not Jade... but Teagan. All too quickly, I know what’s happening. “Let her go!” I plead, but my words fall on deaf ears.

“Do not give me orders, Abilene. You and your maid both know the laws.” My father snaps his fingers again and the Commander strides across the room to my friend. He grabs the back of her white sleeping shift and with a fierce yank, he tears the fabric, exposing her back. Her tanned skin is pristine and unmarked, but I know that won’t last. Not only have I seen this before, I’d lived it.

I don’t need to see her face to sense that she’s crying. Teagan clings to the torn fabric to keep it pulled up over her chest. Unintelligible words pour from her mouth, blocked by a gag of fabric tied tightly around her head. As uncomfortable as it is, at least she will have something to bite down on. My stomach turns at the thought.

“Father, please,” I beg, but he ignores me. This is as much a punishment for her as it is for me.

“How many lashes do you think, Tobias? Eight? Nine?” My father’s musings are almost playful. How can they be enjoying this? I look to my stepmother in desperation, but she has her head turned away. A slight green tinge has washed over her face, and she’s likely wishing she had the authority to get up and leave.

“Ten, I think, Your Majesty.”

“Very good. You may proceed.” While the Commander readies the whip he keeps on him at all times, my father leans forward in his throne to speak directly to Teagan. “I hope the sleep was worth it.”

“You can’t do this!” I cry. Ten lashes for sleeping in my bed—something she’s done on and off for years at my request—is not justice. “I’ll take her lashes!”

The two men ignore my pleas and the first crack of the whip sends a muffled scream echoing through the throne room.

“Stop!”

By the third crack, even the baby wails. Its tiny lungs produce more sound than I could have ever imagined, but still my father does not give the command to stop this.

“Teagan, I’m sorry!” I say, though I know she won’t hear me. Her ears will be ringing by now, temporarily deafened by the whip and her own shrieks. This should be me. This is the truth behind ‘Abilene the Merciful,’ though the cost of a Marked is higher.

When the Commander finally lowers the whip and backs away, Teagan is little more than a crumbled heap of pants and sobs. Her back seeps crimson, the bronze skin broken in ten criss-crossed lines that will never fully heal. Long after the skin closes and the pain recedes, those scars will remain. She may not be a Marked, but she *is* marked. This night will follow her. It will haunt her dreams as it will mine, and perhaps now even ever-cheerful Teagan will lose the ability to rest peacefully. She didn’t deserve this, and I have to bite down hard on my lip to stop myself from saying so. It won’t help her now, and I won’t risk making things worse for her.

“Take her,” my father says with a dismissive wave of his hand. A young serving girl skitters to

Teagan's side and eases her up. They move slowly for the exit, and all I can do is watch as the trail of blood droplets behind them grows longer.

"Take her to my room," I say. When my father doesn't object, the girl nods once to me. I wait for the image of Teagan to disappear before I slide my gaze back to my father. I work to keep the emotion from my face, but the sting in my eyes must be showing all too clearly.

"Step forward, Abilene." When I don't move, his lips flatten into a tight line. "Did you think you would not be punished?"

I thought nothing of the sort. I would have gladly taken Teagan's lashings in addition to my own because, as horrible as they are, I've grown accustomed to this. The Commander reaches for my dress, meaning to tear it in the same way he'd torn Teagan's, but I slap his hand away. I loosen the ties on the front of my dress and then reach behind me to do the same with the back. I pull the fabric forward, keeping it bunched around my breasts. The Commander has been trying to sneak a peek since my body matured, but I won't give him the satisfaction.

"How many lashes will it be this time, Father?" I ask, my eyes locked onto his. There's no hint of remorse in those eyes, nor is there even a flicker of hesitation. If anything, my unwavering gaze seems to have angered him more.

"Ten, just as your maid. Plus another twenty for the Marked."

Confusion twists my face. "Which Marked? None have debts."

This is the way it's always been. For every Marked I spare, I'd take twenty lashes on their behalf. That was the cost of a Marked, and had been since the day I'd intervened with Jade's execution when I was seven years old. I think the lashes were meant to deter me from interfering again, to teach me a lesson about the King's authority, but I couldn't bear to see another die on the post. In the last fifteen years, there have only been twelve successful executions, and most of those were because they occurred when I was confined to my bed, healing from another lashing. In all that time, forty-three people became Marked, and I'd received twenty lashes for each of them.

"A Marked has been freed. He may have saved your life, but there is a blood debt to be paid."

So there was a cost to free a Marked, too. I shouldn't have expected anything less. I want to ask if my life means so little to him, but with a whip in the Commander's hand, this is far from the time to be mouthing off. Instead, I brace myself for the first blow. When it comes, I clench my fists tighter over the fabric of my dress and bite down hard on my lip. The Commander is skilled, and each new lash bites deeper into my flesh than the one before it as old scars split open. The nerves in my back sing a horrible tune that only I can hear, but my jaw remains shut. No cries will come from me this night because, if all the other lashings were justified, this one is not.

When it's over, only a single tear escapes my eye and runs down a flushed cheek. "May I go, Father?" I pant, my voice not my own.

"You may."

Someone moves to help me, but I shake off their hands and climb shakily to my feet. "I'm fine," I snap. They can help me once I'm out of this room, but not a moment before.

My legs are shaky and staying upright is a challenge, but Gods willing, I will make it to that door. The maid walks alongside me, her hands hovering helplessly. She pulls the door open and I all but throw myself through it. As soon as I'm out of eyesight, my knees buckle and she has to catch me before I hit the floor.

"My Lady," she says, and I feel the sudden urge to slap her for using the title. I don't, of course, because not only is that misplaced anger, but I don't have the strength.

"I'm fine," I say again, though softer this time. "Help me to my room."

The walk feels impossibly long, and when we finally reach the hall, I can hear Teagan's sobs from within. I muster the strength to enter the room on my own and hobble to her side. She lies on her stomach, atop the very bed that led to her pain. I flop down beside her. This is nothing new to me, but it is for her.

"Teagan," I breathe, taking her hand tightly in mine. Her face is tear-streaked and her eyes are red and unfocused. "I'm so sorry."

"Abby," she sobs in answer and squeezes my hand. I know what she's feeling now. Not because I feel it too, but because I remember my first flogging. It's a shock to realize that the worst pain is not the lashing itself, but the burning that comes after. Flesh is not meant to be torn, and the damaged nerves burn like fire held against the skin.

"It'll be okay," I assure her. "It will pass. Just try to breathe through it." I take my own advice, because the fire is coming to life now atop my back as well. My nerves are not healed from the last time, so they will be extra angry tonight.

"How many did he give you?" She forces the words out through small gasps. She's losing the battle to shock.

"That doesn't matter. You need to slow your breathing."

She takes a breath to placate me, but it gets caught in her throat. "How many?"

I sigh. Telling her won't help, but neither will ignoring her. "Thirty. Ten for sneaking out, and twenty for Jade."

She squeezes my hand tighter. "I didn't... I didn't know it was like this." It's hard for her to speak now, so I know the pain is reaching its peak. The girls around us move in a flurry to prepare the salve that will lessen the burning, but it takes time. Judging by the smells, I suspect there's only a few minutes left before some relief will find us.

"Try not to think about it."

Her face presses deep into the bedding. "It hurts."

"I know. It will stop."

I feel a hand touch one of my gashes, and the sudden burst of pain turns quickly to a faint stinging numbness. "Do her first," I bark, shocked that the maids would start with me. Teagan is deeper in this than I am.

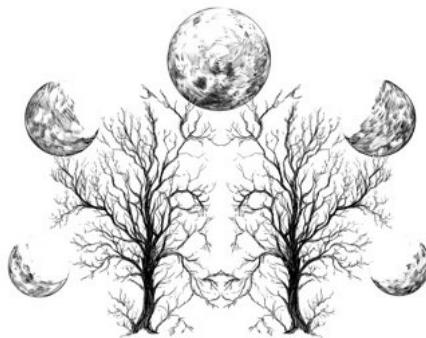
"My Lady, your lashes are worse and—"

"I don't care! Do Teagan first!"

They must obey because, save for that one small spot, pain continues to radiate through me. After a few agonizing minutes, Teagan relaxes beside me. When the stinging coolness returns to my back, I loosen my grip on her and let myself sink into the bedding. It will be hard to sleep, if not impossible, but now is the best time to try. Soon, the numbing will wear off and the fire will return. I don't know how Jade and the other Marked made it through lashings far worse than this. They would have been given no salves or tinctures to ease pain and speed healing. Those that managed to stave off infection would have suffered days in this condition with no one to hold their hands. At least Teagan was always there for me, and this time, I can be there for her.

CHAPTER SIX

ABBY



The following days were a blur of pain. Confined to my bed, with Teagan on a cot beside me, all we could do was lie on our stomachs and teeter between light sleep and agonizing wakefulness. Once our wounds had closed and only a stiff rawness remained, the blur turned to perpetual boredom. This was always the hardest part for me. I wasn't made to be imprisoned behind stone walls, unable to even look out from a window. The longer I had to rest, the greater the anxiety grew within me. Most instances after a lashing, I would spend a week like this and relied on Teagan to tell me of the goings-on within the palace. I would lose myself in her stories and songs, and imagine myself living them.

But now? Teagan can't be my lifeline. When she'd recovered enough to move around, she all but disappeared. The few times I had seen her, the smile on her face was forced and the light in her eyes had dimmed. Whatever spark had glowed so brightly within her has gone dark, and there's no telling if she'll ever recover from this. It's been four days since I've seen her last. Of course I haven't reported her absence to anyone, though I'm growing worried.

A knock sounds on the door to my chambers. Normally Teagan would answer it for me, but she still hasn't returned from wherever it is she went. My back strains in protest as I stand from my chair, but the once agonizing pain has ebbed into a dull ache that will cease to exist in a few days' time.

I open the door to find a Guardian waiting for me. I recognize him as one of the young men I'd had a fling with, and briefly wonder if somewhere deep down he knows the scarred girl was me. If he has any inkling, he doesn't let on.

"Princess," he greets me with a deep bowing of his head. "The King requests your presence in the library."

I almost groan at the words. I haven't seen my father since the lashing, and if there was a way out of this, I would take it. Alas, no one refuses my father.

I let the man escort me, though I know very well where the library is. On more than one occasion, I've stolen a book or two to read at my leisure. One would think the library would be open to all—or at least, the royal family—but it's more or less become my father's private sanctuary in recent years.

Before the Guardian can knock on the sturdy oak door, I let myself in. "You asked to see me?"

My father sits in a plush chair next to the fireplace, a fur blanket draped over his lap and a book open in his hand. I work to keep my eyes on him, but the many books lining the walls keep drawing my focus. I wonder if I'll be able to swipe one so I'll at least have something to help with the boredom until I'm able to leave the palace again.

"Come," he beckons with a wave of his hand. He wears a ring on each finger, the colourful jewels

sparkling in the firelight. He sets his book down on the small table next to him, keeping it open to his page while he shifts his attention to me. I'm an intruder in this space, whether he asked me here or not.

I move to his side and give a slight bow before sitting in the chair across from him. I try to look relaxed, but my back is stiffened straight. My body is on high alert, no doubt a response to the trauma from the last time I saw him. This may even be the first time he's summoned me to this room. He caught me in here once when I was still a child, flipping through the pages of a fictionalized book about dragons. Dragons once existed, of course, but never in the sense the book described. Thinking about it now has me wanting to finish it. Many of the books in this room are bound in brown leather, while silver covers any pertaining to the history of Lunae. The book of dragons, however, was a rich vermillion. It shouldn't be difficult to find if I scan the shelves.

"Are you healing well, Abilene?"

I swallow bile. "Very well, thank you." Pleasantries will get me through this. I shift my gaze from him and study the shelves on the wall behind him. All the books there are bound in various shades of brown.

"I called you here tonight because I have a gift for you." A gift? So this is his way of apologizing. He's never shown remorse before, but I'd known what I was getting myself into then. These fresh scars on my back were brought about by his temper alone.

He lifts the fur from his lap and leans forward to wrap it around my shoulders. I realize then that I recognize this animal as the wolf that attacked me during the last Lunar Hunt. He—or she, there's no way to know now—has been skinned and sewn into a shawl. The tailor left the legs, tail, and face intact, blunting the teeth and claws and replacing the eyes with two shimmering emeralds that rival those on my father's rings.

He studies me a moment, evidently waiting for some show of approval. The pelt is beautiful, sure, but wearing it feels somehow wrong. It's a silly thought. The wolf is dead while I am not, and the first snow will fall soon enough. There's no reason to decline the gift.

"It's lovely," I say through tight lips. Standing from the chair, I force myself to take a step closer so that I can look into the grand mirror on the wall behind him. I'd always felt like this mirror was a cruel joke, as the intricate silver frame around it would always be far more beautiful than whoever dared to stand in front of it. The top of the frame spans upwards in snaking curves that resemble leafless tree branches before morphing into an ornate full moon. The bottom corners of the frame are also decorated—the left side with a crouched dragon with smoke and flames erupting from its fearsome jaws, while the right side has the artist's rendition of a siren sitting atop a rock that juts out of silver waves. I'd always imagined sirens to be more fishlike, but the woman could pass for human upon first glance.

I should be gazing at myself in the reflection, or at least the pelt, but my eyes keep darting to my father sitting mere steps away. Apology or not, having my back to him is not working for me. I turn abruptly when the anxiety becomes unbearable, and inadvertently knock into the small table between us. The stack of books atop it clatters to the floor—the one my father had been reading included.

"Stupid girl," he hisses as he snatches his book and angrily flips through pages to find his place.

I bend to retrieve the other books despite the fierce ache of my new scars. A servant could do this, and if it was any item other than books, I may have let them. Books are sacred and should be treated as such. The last tome I pick up differs from the others. This one has a distinctive red backing. There's no way to know for sure if it's the book of dragons I remember from childhood, but I hastily tuck it under the shawl, regardless. There's no way my father would let me take it out of here if he

saw me with it.

A hand latches onto my arm and my blood runs cold. I hadn't noticed my father move, but the need to put distance between us becomes my sole focus the instant I feel his hand on me. "Are you all right?" He wouldn't be asking if he'd seen me tuck away the book.

I all but yank my arm from his grasp and back away from him. "Fine," I hiss. "Standing is still a bit uncomfortable." It's not entirely a lie, but my sudden clumsiness has everything to do with him.

I hastily replace the other books on the table and scurry to the door. "I'd like to go to bed now, if that's all right with you."

He waves me off before reclaiming his seat and returning to his reading. "Fine, fine. Goodnight, Abilene." I offer him a quick goodnight of my own before darting out of the room with my new treasure.



I return to my chambers to find a small piece of parchment slipped under my door. The name 'Abby' is scrawled across one side, and from that alone, I know it must be from Teagan. Very few of the staff can write their own names, let alone mine, and even fewer would call me Abby. I know Teagan can read and write, because I was the one who taught her.

I move to the desk and set down my book before unfolding the note. The ink appears a reddish-brown in the candlelight, and if I didn't know better, I'd say this was written in blood. Ink is expensive and if Teagan didn't steal some from somewhere in the palace, blood would be the next best thing. Although the thought makes me shudder, I read.

Abby,

Meet me in your garden at sundown.

Tell no one.

Burn this note.

I blink before reading the note again. Glancing out my window, I can only just see remnants of the sun as it sets beyond the distant mountains. There's still time. Burying my concerns down deep, I toss the paper into the fire and bolt from the room.

When I step out onto the patio garden, I immediately spot a figure standing there—but it isn't Teagan.

"Jade?" I sprint across the distance between us and throw my arms around his neck. His body is so warm against mine, and it's a comfort I didn't know I needed. When he wraps his arms around me I don't even feel the ache of my back. All I want to feel is him. His lips press into my hair as he kisses the top of my head. "What are you doing here?" And why is he shirtless again?

"That's a good question," a voice answers from behind us. I startle at the sound, but Jade remains relaxed. "I told you I'd bring her to you," Teagan says, stepping through the same door I'd come from moments before.

“I couldn’t wait any longer,” Jade says with the crooked smile I’m beginning to love.

I want to know why he’s here, but there’s a more pressing question on my mind. I turn to Teagan. “Where have you been? You can’t just abandon me like that with no explanation. I’ve been so worried.”

She joins us at the edge of the balcony. “There’s no time to explain, but I promise I will once we’re out of here.” I notice then that she has a satchel slung over her shoulder. Jade takes it from her.

Something in her eyes tells me that if I leave with them, I won’t be coming back. “I’m not going anywhere until someone tells me what’s going on.”

Jade and Teagan share a look, and a wave of jealousy sloshes in my belly. As far as I knew, they didn’t know each other, but that look says differently. And what was it that Teagan said? That she would bring me to Jade?

“There’s no time,” Teagan says finally.

“Then make time.”

I feel a warm hand wrap around mine and turn to face the source. Jade’s lips are mere inches from mine, and the scent of him so close is intoxicating. I want to stay mad, to hold my ground and demand answers, but being this close to him is lowering my resolve. “Do you trust me?” he asks on a breath.

I don’t answer right away, despite the one word screaming in my mind. Yes. Yes. Yes! I sigh. “Yes.”

“Then come with us. Come with me.”

I let him lead me to the wall, and together we make our way down the same escape I’ve grown so familiar to. On the way down, Teagan has some trouble finding her footing, but Jade catches her when she stumbles.

We scurry through the darkness, keeping to the shadows of the eerily quiet city. I’ve never been this deep in the city, but it’s not what I expected. The sun has only just set, but there’s not a soul to be seen, save for the occasional pair of Guardians on their patrols. My tongue is burning with questions. Where is everyone? Is it always like this? Where are we going? I don’t dare speak a word, even when we come to a stop outside a poorly maintained wooden building. No light shines through the windows, not even the faintest flicker of a distant candle in a back room.

Before I can ask what this place is, Jade pounds a fist thrice against the door. When only silence answers, he raps again. “Damnit, Rhett,” he hisses under his breath. “Open the door.”

The door opens a crack and a single eye peers out, reflecting the torchlight that illuminates the street. “Oh, man. Merrick is going to be pissed.”

Merrick?

Jade shoves hard into the door before Rhett can bar our entry, and then shuts it tightly behind us. It’s so dark that even if my eyes adjust, I doubt I’ll be able to see. I have to feel around blindly as we walk through the building until Jade’s hand clasps tightly around mine. I let him lead me, even though he should be struggling just as much as I am.

“Where are we going?” I whisper when we come to a slow decline. There’s not a doubt in my mind that I would have fallen flat on my face had Jade not been holding me.

I expect Jade to answer, but the stranger’s voice fills what must be an underground tunnel, similar to those beneath the palace. Perhaps this is what remains of the old silver mines? “Somewhere you shouldn’t be, Princess.”

“Don’t call me that.”

A single breathy laugh comes in answer, while Jade gives my hand a squeeze and shifts so that he’s more ahead of me rather than walking by my side. I can’t be sure if he’s trying to better lead the

way, or if this is an act of protection against whatever lays ahead. All I know for certain is that Rhett is right. I most definitely should not be here.

Finally, a soft glow becomes visible at the end of the tunnel. There are voices up ahead, and the words are not whispered. Whoever is hiding beneath the city is not afraid to be heard. The scent of smoke and cooking meat hangs in the air, and each crackle of burning wood echoes through the tunnel, sounding much louder than it should.

Rhett, who seems oddly familiar now that I can better make out his features, pushes ahead of us and all but sprints into the illuminated opening at the end of the tunnel. “I just want to say that I had nothing to do with this,” he says as he’s greeted by sounds of recognition.

Those sounds quiet as Jade, Teagan, and I emerge. Where there were warm welcomes for Rhett, there are groans of annoyance for us. Or are they for me?

“You brought her here? What were you thinking?” someone asks Jade. This man seems oddly familiar, too. I gaze around, taking in all the faces—both men and women, about twenty of them—and it isn’t until one of them turns from me that I realize it. Faint pink lines criss-cross the entirety of his exposed back. In fact, none of the people here—save for Teagan and I—are wearing proper shirts.

The Marked.

Jade seems unbothered as he leads me deeper into the room, not letting go of my hand. He moves to the wall and takes a seat on the cluster of crates, easing me down beside him. I can’t stop my nervous shifting as twenty or more pairs of suspicious eyes study me, and I feel my cheeks flush hot.

“We’re fucked,” a woman says to Jade as she takes a step toward us. “You fucked us.” I think her name is Petra. If I’m remembering correctly, she was one of the first Marked. She can’t be much older than me, but the lines of her face have grown hard and more defined. “What did you tell her?”

“Nothing,” I say before Jade can answer. I’ve had enough of this. The secrets, the silence, the wary stares as if I’m their enemy. “But that needs to change right now.” I let my eyes touch each of them briefly, moving from one end of the room to the other.

One of the smaller men shakes his head and draws a sword. “I’m sorry, Princess. You’ve seen too much.”

I snatch a dull-looking knife off the crate beside me and jump to my feet as the man takes a step towards me, sword raised. There are snickers from the crowd, as if the idea of me with a knife in my hand is funny—and perhaps it is. I’ve never trained with a weapon, but how hard can it be? The snickers cease when Jade takes an easy stance beside me. They’re afraid of him, despite lacking a weapon of his own.

“Enough!” a voice booms before flesh can meet metal. “The damage is done. Lower your weapons.” I look to the tunnel opposite the one we’d entered through as Merrick emerges. “You too, Princess.”

“My name is Abby,” I say, utterly fed up with everyone referring to me by my title.

He ignores me and focuses his attention on Jade. “We voted to leave *Abby* out of this.”

“That vote took place without me.”

“It’s not my fault your new schedule doesn’t line up with ours.” He disapproves of Jade’s Guardianship, and I can’t say I blame him. “I see Teagan filled you in.”

I look at her and realize for the first time that she’s comfortable here among these people. “Teagan?”

She offers me a sympathetic look. “Abby is here now. She’s the reason we all live. She’s in this, whether you like it or not.”

Petra scoffs. “Lady of the Marked or not, how do we know she won’t go running to her father?”

Against my instincts, I turn my back on the crowd and unfasten the back of my dress, allowing the fabric to loosen and reveal the scars visible there—both new and old. Without the fabric barrier, they sting in the hot air of the tunnel, but I ignore it. “Because I’m one of you,” I say, before turning back to Merrick. “I thought you were dead.”

He laughs once. “The forest isn’t as bad as our beloved king thinks.”

“Is this where you tell me you’re in league with the wolves?” Of course, that’s a rhetorical question, borne of sarcasm and annoyance, but he seems to take it seriously.

“Wolves only kill when they’re hungry. Humans kill when they feel like it.”

“Are you going to kill me, then?” Jade shifts beside me. He’d relaxed some, but that question brings him back on edge.

Merrick waves a flippant hand. “It seems you’re not our enemy.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “My sister is a seer. Whatever you have planned, she’ll see it coming.”

“We know.” He looks to Teagan. She’s been a spy, but for how long?

She takes my hand in hers. “I couldn’t tell you, but I would have never let them hurt you.”

“No one would have dared,” Jade adds, although clearly some would have tried if Merrick hadn’t intervened. He must be their leader, or the closest thing they have to one. The Marked aren’t meant to organize like this. As far as I knew, they only gathered for the Lunar Hunt, just as everyone else in Lunae. They aren’t slaves, but they live in poverty without jobs or stable homes. Now that I think about it, I can’t say for certain how they live. The palace walls have always kept me prisoner, and the only time I was allowed out was for an execution or the hunt itself. It shouldn’t be a surprise that the Marked would band together, rely on each other. I’m not sure if even the Guardians would notice. Marked are ghosts. The living dead. They exist only to be seen, but does anyone actually bother to look?

“Are you hungry?” Merrick asks, moving to the crackling fire, where an entire boar is roasting on a spit. There’s more than enough food for everyone here, and then some.

Only one word escapes the space between my lips. “How?”

That question is many in one. How did they get a boar and bring it here? How did they do it with no one knowing? Is this a common thing? If it is, they eat far better than the rest of Lunae—royalty included. As far as I knew, the only food we had came from the hunt. If hunting regularly was possible, why the stars aren’t we doing it? Can we feed everyone this way? How many lives would be spared?

He winks. “My brief exile in the forest gave me the chance to do some hunting. I’m used to having to sneak out of the town, so it was a delightful change.” He pulls a knife from his pants and slices through the meat with ease. He puts the slice—bigger than any meal I’ve had in weeks—on a metal plate and holds it out to me. I take it, and the next thing I know, we’re all eating around the fire as if the earlier confrontation had never happened. Some of them may still be unhappy about my presence in this secret place, but they’re not showing it now.

When my belly is sated and the pain of hunger has vanished, I set the plate down. “So, this is the start of the rebellion?”

A few people snicker, and I catch the rolling of eyes from a few others. “More like the end of one,” Merrick answers.

“What’s your plan? Storm the palace?” I’m not sure if they trust me enough to tell me anything, but I’m curious. It’s hard to think of the palace separately from myself. This is the longest I’ve been away from it on my own accord. In the depths of this tunnel, there’s no telling what time it is, but for all I know, dawn could be just around the corner. What would happen if I didn’t return?

“As you said, your sister would see that coming.”

That’s not really an answer, but at least he seems to have given it some thought. Arabella would see that. The instant people decided to riot, she would know. That’s how her visions have always worked. She only sees what’s certain to pass beyond a doubt, and only what will affect her or someone she loves. So long as there’s still debate or question, things can be hidden from her. “So what, then?”

Merrick doesn’t answer this time, but he nods once to Jade. Jade’s hand finds mine, and our fingers intertwine. “We’re going to Marein,” he says, studying my face for a reaction.

My brows crease together. “Marein is gone. The wave—”

“A lie,” Teagan says. “There was no wave.”

“But the evacuation of you and the other children—”

Petra joins in. “Why is it that not one adult survived? Do you think a natural disaster would show mercy to the young?”

I’d never thought about it. About twenty children were rescued that day from the ruins of their city, but not one adult was found alive. Or so my father said. I turn to Teagan. “What do you really remember?”

“Much of it is a blur. When Lunae’s army came, the water turned red and blood pooled in the sand. Screams rang out in every direction. They cut my mother down while she begged for our lives. They took my father,—I don’t know where—while my brother and I were tied up on the beach with the other children.”

“You have a brother?”

“Had. He was nine.” She pauses a moment, pain clouding her eyes. “Old enough to remember.”

The Guardians only brought back children under the age of five. I’d been told that none other’s had survived, but never stopped to think about why that was. “But you remember.”

She nods. “I remember.”

“As do many of us,” Merrick says. He’s likely the oldest one here, so he can’t mean himself.

I turn to Jade. “Do you—”

“No,” he says, before I can ask. I can’t help but feel like there’s more to that, but I’m not going to push him. Especially not here.

“So we go to Marein. Then what?”

He shrugs. “Join the survivors. Regroup. Prepare for war.”

“Survivors?” They just said all the adults were slaughtered, so what survivors are there?

“Some myths are true.” He can’t mean sirens. Even if they did once exist, they’re long gone, just like the dragons. If there were sirens now, everyone would know about it. “I know that look. History can be altered depending on who tells it.”

“If everything you say is true, then all the Guardians and their families would know. They wouldn’t all go along with slaughtering innocents.”

“Not all of them did,” Merrick agrees. “Three hundred Guardians left for Marein and just under two hundred returned. Some were killed, others defected. I can’t say what happened to them.”

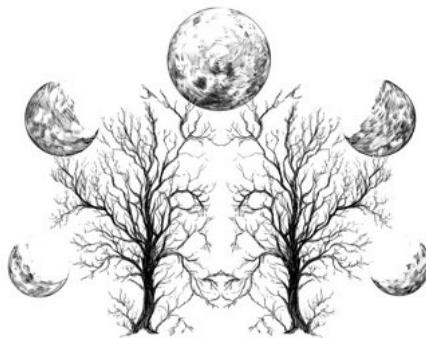
This is all too much. My head is spinning, and I can’t see how to stop it. Even if we sat here for hours and they answered every one of my questions, I’m going to need weeks, if not months, to process all of this. History can be altered depending on who tells it... If that’s true, it means my father would have ordered the eradication of an entire kingdom. And for what? We weren’t at war with Marein. ...Or were we? “When do we leave?”

“You’re not going anywhere,” a familiar voice echoes, and my heart drops. The Commander steps

out from the tunnel, flanked by five Guardians with drawn swords. “Seems we’ve found a nest of rats,” he says before his eyes settle on me. “And a mouse.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

ABBY



*J*snatch the knife I'd found earlier and point it toward the Commander. He slinks out of the shadows, moving more like a cat than a serpent. My heart beats wildly and my legs ache to run. He's looking at me like a predator would. *Just like that wolf did.*

"What do we have here?" The Commander sneers, his voice playful.

"What the Marked do is none of your concern," someone says, but I don't dare look away to see who.

"You're right. I couldn't care less if a few rats want to play. The mouse, however, is leaving with me."

Jade sidesteps so he's in front of me and raises his bow so that it's pointed directly at the Commander's head. "Take one more step and it'll be your last."

When the Commander moves, Jade releases an arrow. It soars across the room, but the Commander is quicker. He angles his sword in front of him, and the arrow bounces off the metal with a harmless clink. "Is that really the best you can do?"

"Teagan. Jade," Merrick says with a tone not to be argued with. "Take her and go."

Jade takes my hand, and before I even register that we're moving, the three of us are already engulfed in darkness. "What about the others? We can't leave them!" The Commander will kill them, and he'll enjoy every moment of it. The sound of clashing metal and forceful grunts echo back to us, and it's almost enough to make me turn on my heels. I'm not a fighter, but if there's the slightest chance that I can reason with the Commander, I need to take it.

"They'll be fine," Jade says, squeezing my hand tighter. I think it's meant to reassure me, but I can't say that it's working. "Trust me."

We move through the tunnel so fast that if it weren't for the sensation of my feet hitting stone, I'd think we were flying. My lungs burn with the exertion. When we come to an incline that I know means we're nearing an exit, my legs protest as if they're about to give out altogether. Thank the Gods for adrenaline.

We burst through a wooden door much like the one we'd entered through, but instead of emerging in the outskirts of the city, we're face to face with trees. How didn't I know this was here? A tunnel that stretches this far couldn't go unnoticed, but here we are. There's no time to ask if the Marked were behind it, because Jade doesn't hesitate. The forest is only steps ahead of us, and we run right for it.

The trees are a blur as we pass between them, moving so fast that I don't know how we haven't hit any. It's dark—*so dark*—but once again Jade seems to have no trouble seeing where we're going.

I glance behind me and can just make out Teagan right on our heels. There's no sign of the Guardians or the other Marked, but I know whoever survives the skirmish will follow, eventually. The Commander and his men may be outnumbered, but each and every one of them are trained fighters. That battle could go either way.

When we finally skid to a stop, my heart is pounding harder than I even knew was possible. My vision is blurred, but it doesn't matter much since I can still barely see anyway.

I lean against a tree and pull in huge mouthfuls of air. My burning lungs feel as if they're refusing to expand, making me cough. When my coughs turn to gasps, my head spins. There's no air. Why is there no air?!

"Abby, hey," Jade's voice calls softly to me. Through my watery vision, I can just make out the shape of him standing in front of me. "I'm sorry, but you need to be quiet."

"I can't—I can't—breathe."

He brushes my hair back before cupping my cheeks with tender hands. "We'll breathe together. Come on, deep breath in."

I do as I'm told and cough on the breath. Teagan is beside me now, hand on my back. Her soft humming fills my ears and brings me back to a simpler time. A time when I wasn't running for my life through the actual forbidden forest.

"Let it out. Another deep breath. And out."

My breathing slows, and the ache in my lungs lessens.

"Better?"

I nod. "Thanks."

"Can you keep going?" There's only the slightest hint of concern in his eyes.

My throat is full of fire and my legs want nothing more than to give out, but I'll do what I have to. "Can we walk?"

He laughs. "Yes, we can walk."

We ease deeper into the forest and the darkness that consumes us. Even with my eyes adjusted, I can only just make out faint outlines of the trees. More than once, I knock my arm against rough bark that scrapes at my now irritated skin. "How do you know where we're going?" I ask after a while. "I can't see anything."

I feel Jade shrug beside me. "Used to it, I guess. This isn't my first time in the forest at night."

I turn my head to Teagan, not that it matters, since I can hardly see her. "And you?"

There's a slight pause before she answers. "Maybe my eyes are better than yours."

I'd laugh if it weren't for the heaviness still in the pit of my stomach. "Are you sure the others will be okay? Should we go back?"

"We keep moving. They'll meet us at the road," Jade says.

What road? "But the Commander—"

"Is as good as dead," he grumbles, and I can only hope he's right. I've never wished death on anyone, but for the Commander I'll make an exception.

We walk in silence, only the occasional snapping of a twig or kicking of a rock to interrupt the stillness. I've never heard the forest so quiet, and I feel as if there are a million pairs of eyes watching us from the shadows. As time passes, the darkness turns to a dim golden haze as the sun steadily rises above the trees. Somehow, we'd traveled through the night.

"We'll rest here." Jade takes his bow off and eases down into a grassy patch of ground wet with morning dew. I don't even mind it as my muscles give in to exhaustion.

"Where's the road?" I ask, squinting through the trees. I'd always believed the forest was

untouched, and no map of Lunae and the surrounding area ever showed any sign of forest roads.

Jade points a hand directly ahead of us. “It’s not far. We’re close enough to hear if anyone is coming, but far enough away to stay hidden.” His face turns serious. “Don’t go wandering.”

“You don’t need to worry about that.” I sit between Teagan and Jade and wonder how they aren’t nearly as worn out as I am. Teagan has distinct bags under her eyes, but she looks like she could go another mile or two. And Jade? He looks as if he’s barely broken a sweat.

“What?” he asks when he notices me staring, and I immediately feel my cheeks flush crimson. I’m not sure why I feel so guilty.

“You must be so cold.”

He looks down at his bare chest, as if only just realizing he’s shirtless. “Not really,” he shrugs.

He has to be lying because even I feel the chill through the fur cloak wrapped around my shoulders. I slip it off and drape it over our laps. It’s just long enough to form a narrow blanket that covers us all.

“Were you not allowed a shirt at that meeting?”

He and Teagan both laugh, but it’s Jade who answers. “Shirts just get in the way sometimes.”

I want to ask what he means, but exhaustion is a powerful force. Teagan leans her head on my shoulder and lets out a yawn that moments later morphs into a soft snore. I guess I was wrong about how tired she was.

“Are you going to sleep?” I ask Jade.

He stares off into the dissipating darkness. “Someone needs to keep watch.”

“And that someone has to be you?”

He flashes me a grin. “No. You want the job?” I can’t stop the yawn fighting to escape. “I guess that answers that.”

“I can stay up.”

“Sleep.” He pulls me in closer to him and kisses the top of my head.



Jade is still seated beside me when I wake, though now he’s examining his bow string. “Can you teach me to use that?” I ask in way of a good morning.

His smirk is answer enough and I can’t help the smile spreading across my own face. We should get moving, I know we should. It’s difficult to tell the exact time with the tall trees surrounding us, but if I had to guess, I’d say we slept about four hours. Despite that, being out here—*being free*—has turned the heaviness of my stomach to bubbling excitement. For the first time in my life, there’s no overbearing father or Commander shooting me warning glances. There will be plenty of time to be fearful later, but for right now? I just want to enjoy some semblance of freedom.

Careful not to wake Teagan, we leave her cuddled up with the wolf pelt and move a short distance away. Jade leads me to a tree with a distinct knot in it and then moves back fifteen paces. Before I can blink, he looses an arrow that soars directly into the heart of the knot.

“Showoff,” I mutter. “You make it look so easy.”

“It is easy.”

I elbow him in the side before making grabby hands for the bow. “Give it to me.”

“While Teagan is sleeping? Naughty girl.”

I elbow him again, hard enough for him to laugh-grunt as I snatch the bow from him. Something catches my eye before I can even think about firing a shot. I hadn't noticed it before, but there's a piece of fabric tied to the top of the bow. Most of it is a dirty brown, but upon closer inspection, I can just make out what looks to be a floral design beneath the stains. "Is this...?" I can't even finish the question as I run the silk through my fingers.

"It's always with me."

It never once occurred to me that Jade would have kept my hair scarf for all these years, but the knowledge sets my heart ablaze. My fingers slide from the scarf to the bow string. In a perfect world, this would come easy to me, but instead my fingers fumble for purchase. It's even harder to balance an arrow, and I haven't even pulled back yet. I can feel the smugness radiating off him, but he doesn't correct me. I focus on the knot and pull the string taut. At least, as taut as my wobbling arm will allow. I lose my grasp and the arrow flies... a whole three feet before skidding into the dirt.

"Wow. That was awful."

"Must be an example of your teaching," I say, forcing the words through a tight jaw.

He flashes me that crooked smile as he collects the arrow and then hands it back to me. "This is nice, you know. Being allowed to look at you. Talk to you."

I turn fully to meet his gaze. "Touch me?"

His mouth twitches, but he doesn't answer. He stands just behind me now, positioning the arrow for me. I move to pull back on the string, but he stops me. "Not so fast. You're skipping steps."

"What other steps are there? You just pull back and let go."

He laughs. "That's not how this works at all. Relax." How can I relax with his hands on my shoulders? He brushes the hair from one side of my neck so that it all cascades down the other. "Straighten your back and spread your legs a bit more." I do, but all I can concentrate on is his warmth against me. Even bathed in the rays of morning sun, he's so much warmer than he should be.

I swallow back the dryness in my throat. "Like that?"

He makes a sound of approval that has my hands trembling. "Relax." His voice is a whisper against my neck. His head is side by side with mine as he lines up his gaze with the target. "Take a deep breath."

I do, but it's ragged. The burning inside me is back, and I long to feel his hands on me again. Him being this close is unbearable. "Jade..."

"Shh. Focus on your breathing and keep your eyes on the tree. Your aim will follow." I do, and my body shifts slightly. His hands run along the length of my arms as he corrects my aim a fraction. "When you're ready, pull back slowly. Don't release until I tell you to."

I take a deep breath and pull at the string. My arm trembles with the force of it until his hand slips over mine and helps pull it back. We stay like that for what's probably seconds, but feels like an eternity.

"Take a breath and breathe out through your mouth." I do, and I feel him mirror me as I let the air slip out through my mouth.

"Let go," he whispers before all the air has left my lungs.

Together, we release the string and the arrow soars. It hits the tree with a thunk, only just missing the knot. He releases me and steps away. "Well done."

"I missed."

"You hit the tree."

Before I can answer, a grumble comes from deep in my stomach. Despite all the food we'd eaten yesterday, I'm hungry again. "How about I find us some breakfast?" he asks, taking the bow.

“Sounds good to me,” Teagan says, appearing behind us and rubbing the sleep from her eyes. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You looked so comfortable,” I tease. “Right at home in the forest.” We all know that’s not true, but at least she was able to get some rest.

Jade leads us through the trees, moving as quietly as a cat. When he stops, we stop. He signals for us to get down, and together we duck behind a large moss-covered log. He pulls back on the bow and I have to struggle to see what he’s aiming at. At first, I see nothing but greenery. Low growing ferns, bushes, grass—and none of the needle variety. This is a whole different world than what I’ve grown used to, and if it wasn’t so late in the year, I wonder if the forest might bloom with flowers.

Faint movement draws my eye and a small grey something hops out from behind a fern on the other side of a small pond too shallow to be populated by fish. Jade takes aim for the rabbit and hesitates only a moment before firing. The arrow pierces the animal without a sound, right through its eye. There wouldn’t have been any time for it to feel pain, and I’m thankful for that. The Lunar Hunt is one thing, but watching the killing of a creature outside of that time is new to me. The grumbling in my stomach makes that thought only a momentary concern.

“Nice shot!” Teagan cheers as Jade leaps over the pond to collect it. It wasn’t *that* wide, but still. That jump was impressive. I guess he really is a showoff.

He sets the rabbit down and clears an area for a fire. “Do you have anything to light it?” I ask as he stacks twigs upright.

“I’ll figure something out.” His eyes move from me to Teagan and then back to the woodpile. Before I can ask how he plans to figure anything out, Teagan steals my attention.

“Can you look at my back and make sure it’s healing?”

The question catches me off guard. “Are you still in pain?”

“No. It’s just that I can’t see it myself, so I want to be sure it’s not getting infected.”

“You should be fine. It’s been long enough that the risk of infection will be low, but I’ll take a look.” Teagan lifts her shirt, and my stomach twists at the ten red lines that scar her once flawless skin. I swallow. “It’s healing well.”

“Got it,” Jade says, and I whip around to see a small gathering of embers morph into a small flame.

“How did you do that so fast?”

He winks at me. “This isn’t my first time in the forest.” I wonder how much time he’s actually spent here while I thought he was suffering in a stuffy tent with other Marked. No one could argue that his life has been great, but it’s nowhere near as horrible as I thought.

Jade makes quick work of the rabbit, and soon my belly is sated again. I would gladly trade my title for a life that kept me fed. A life spent with my best friend and a good man.

Jade’s head snaps up, and without warning, he kicks out the fire.

“What is it?” Teagan asks. “Is it Merrick?”

He doesn’t answer her for a long moment. “Shit,” he hisses.

He ushers us down a slope where we lay on our stomachs behind a log. I hear nothing at first, until thundering hooves slam against the dirt road just on the other side of a cluster of trees. A horse neighs as it’s forced to a sudden stop and boots thump to the ground.

“I know you’re here, Abilene.” The Commander’s voice echoes through the trees, making even the birds go silent. He’s no doubt smelling the remnants of our fire still carried on the wind. I should have argued against breakfast. This is my fault. I tug my wolf shawl tighter around me, hoping the fur will somehow camouflage me. “If you make this easy, then maybe I’ll let your traitorous friends live.”

There's no chance of that.

Jade dives sideways as something whizzes towards us, putting himself in front of Teagan and me. When he lets out a sharp groan, I look to see an arrow imbedded in his lower arm, just beneath his elbow. The tip of the arrow went all the way through and is poking out the other side. Without hesitation, he grabs the tipped end and rips the rest of the arrow through his flesh before tossing it aside.

What the fuck?

Blood spurts, but there's no time to do anything. The Commander and his men know we're here. Jade looks angrier than I've ever seen him. He marches out from the thicket towards the men. "You could have hit her!"

The Commander smirks back at him and signals his archers to wait. "Seems it was worth the risk, because here you are." He cranes his neck to get a better look at me.

"Come, Princess. It's time to go home."

"She's not going anywhere with you." Jade's whole body tenses, as if readying himself for something. Before I can find out what, an abrupt scream has our full attention. It came from the left, but I can't see anything besides nervous Guardians also searching for the source.

Jade stiffens by my side, and his hand on my back moves to the string of his bow. "Don't make a sound," he says in a low voice.

A flash of silver catches my eye, but by the time my head whips around, whatever it was is gone. A low growl sounds somewhere to our left, but the sound is drawn out by another shriek. This time I see the man go down, but whatever took him out disappears from sight. It's too fast for my eyes to follow, leaving only a silver glint as it moves through trees and shadow.

The Guardians panic. At least two of them are dead, and no one knows what they're up against. Drawn swords shake in trembling hands and arrows fly blindly. We're lucky none of the archers are aiming this way.

Another blur of silver turns to a splattering of red as a Guardian only a few yards ahead of us is torn in two. He doesn't have the chance to force a scream through his gaping mouth as his legs are sent flying away from the rest of him. The thunk they make against a large tree turns my stomach, but I can't look away.

"Where is it?" a Guardian calls, panic ringing clear in his voice.

"Does anyone see anything?" another calls back.

"It's the monster!"

Another scream reverberates through the trees. Whatever it is, it's killing them all one by one.

Jade readies his bow. "When I tell you to run, get on a horse and follow the road out of the forest."

"What about you?" The idea of leaving him behind is absurd. I can't do that. I won't.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be right behind you. Go!"

There's no time to think. I jump to my feet and lurch out of the bramble towards one of the frightened horses with Teagan right behind me. It rears up as I grab the reins, but I'm able to still it long enough to get a leg in a stirrup and pull myself onto its back. Teagan clammers on behind me. The animal is all too happy to run, so it takes only the softest of kicks to send it flying down the road.

Something hits us only seconds later, and I feel Teagan slip off behind me. "Teagan!" I pull hard on the reins, forcing the horse to stop as I whip my head around. I outstretch a hand, ready to pull her back on, but what I see makes my heart all but stop. Teagan is on the ground, eyes open yet unseeing, blood seeping from an open gash to her throat.

There's no time to stop because an arrow flies by, only inches from my head. Jade is on a horse behind me, quickly closing the distance between us. "Go!"

I give my horse another kick and it lurches forward again. Away from the massacre... and away from my friend.

Something hits me this time with enough force to knock the air from my lungs. I blink the tears from my eyes and instead of the open road ahead of me, all I see are swirling shades of green. The tree canopy, I realize, as I become aware that whatever hit me knocked me off the horse, just as it did Teagan.

"Jade?" I call out, feeling around blindly.

A low growl is my only answer. I roll onto my stomach and try to scramble to my knees, but something sharp slices into the back of my right shoulder. The pain hits me sharper than a whip's lash and the scream that rips through me is unlike anything I've produced before. Whatever air was in my lungs comes out with such force that I think I might vomit them out entirely.

I want to speak, to call for help or beg for my life, but no words can make it through the inhuman shriek. *Please. Please, no. Don't kill me.*

The massive forepaws of an animal are on either side of me now and what I can only imagine is hot blood drips from its jaws onto my back. It's going to rip my throat out like it did to Teagan, or tear me in half like that Guardian.

I blink the tears from my eyes, and that's when I see Jade. Not on the ground, but on a tree branch—his once bare skin now slick with red. His eyes are open, the piercing green of them staring back at me in horror. He couldn't have gotten that high himself, and the growl of the animal towering above me saps me of everything I have left. Teagan is dead, Jade is dead, and any moment, I will be too.

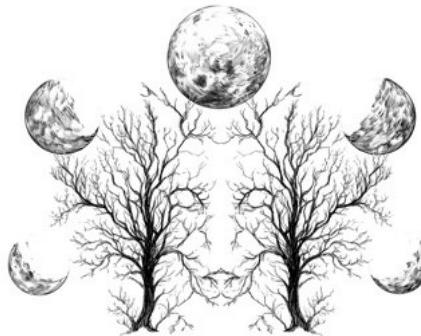
I close my eyes and wait for the snapping of teeth and tearing of flesh, but nothing comes. As quickly as it attacked, the animal—the monster—disappears.

"Jade?" I choke on his name. Darkness seeps in around the edges of my vision, but I look at him for as long as I can. Still in the tree. Still unmoving.

My eyes grow heavy, and I let the darkness have me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

QUINN



*T*here's blood on my hands.

That alone isn't unusual, but everything else about this is wrong. I'm human, but I shouldn't be. I feel it in every cell of my body. The monster is still ever present, demanding. Hidden just beneath the surface of this human shell.

The blood is dry, but that means little. I can still smell it, *taste it*. Deer, boar, a rabbit or two... and human. *So much human*.

What the fuck were so many people doing this deep in the forest? I should go back to where it happened and try to understand. What's one more piece of my humanity stripped away? It's not like there's much of it left now.

I pull in a deep breath. The tang of blood is still heavy on the wind, so I can't be far off. There won't be much left, but there'll be enough to make sense of this. This is far from the first time I've taken human life, but the last time it was on this scale...

'Please.'

I freeze when the memory of that voice hits me, feather soft and pleading. I replay the word over and over in my mind, willing myself to remember it—to remember *her*—and then I see it. A woman cloaked in wolf's skin lying in the mud, blood seeping from a wound on her back as my claws tear into her.

But then I stopped.

Why did I stop?

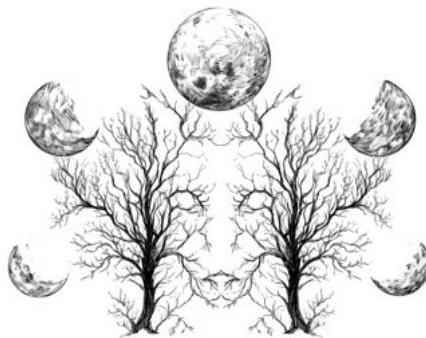
'Please.'

I shake my head and the memory with it. I should just return home. I'm human, so there's no reason for me to keep to the trees. What's happened is in the past and there's nothing that can be done to change it.

But the girl. Did I just leave her there? If she's alive, abandoning her now would be the same as killing her. I can make excuses for the monster, but I don't have that luxury. One way or another, she needs to be dealt with.

CHAPTER NINE

ABBY



I'm still lost to the darkness, but something is different. There's a dull pain in my shoulder, ever growing and making itself the focus of my attention. I long to ease back into the nothingness and return to the place with no pain and no loss. My memories are returning, and with them comes a swirling haze of images that dance through the forefront of my mind.

The blood. The monster. *Jade*.

He can't be dead. Just because he was in that tree doesn't mean he didn't survive like I did.

I try to open my eyes, but they protest in heavy refusal. Only small streams of light reach me, and with them comes the blurred image of two shadows—no, people—speaking at the far end of the room. I can't see enough to make out details, but I can already tell this place is unfamiliar. The scent of pine and something sweeter invades my senses, and it's nothing like Lunae.

I try to call out to Jade, but the two figures don't seem to hear me. I can only catch wisps of their hushed conversation as I force my senses to focus.

"Are you certain she wasn't bitten?"

"Positive. Aside from the bump on her head and the scratch on her shoulder, she's fine."

A scratch? It feels a lot worse than a scratch. The burning in my upper arm is more prominent now, and it feels as if flesh was torn clean from bone. I turn my head towards it, and I can just see through the blur the bloodied cloth wrapped tightly around my shoulder and upper arm. Whoever these strangers are, they've at least taken the time to tend to my wounds.

Pain radiates through me as I ease myself upwards in the bed, and I can't stop the groan from slipping between my lips. I have to speak to someone in charge. I have to find Jade and see if anyone else survived the attack.

"Whoa, whoa, hey. Don't move too quickly," a female voice says hurriedly as the blurs rush to my bedside. I blink away the haze and force my vision to clear. A man and a woman stare down at me, concern radiant in their eyes.

The woman who'd spoken is plump, but in a pleasing way—a way that I've never been. She eats well and regularly, which is a luxury no one in Lunae has had for some time. The man beside her is thinner, but the ripples of his muscles make up for it. He too hasn't known starvation. At least not in recent years.

"Can you tell us your name?" the man asks in a deep voice. He looks like he could be the same age as my father, but the years have been kinder to him. Age-greysed hair falls in gentle waves that just touch his shoulders, and the wrinkles at the corners of his dark eyes portray a man who has seen both beauty and horror in his time. His dark skin is tight over his thick arms and chest, and I'd bet he could

do as much damage with just his fists as he could with a sword. If this man isn't in command of whatever this place is, then I don't want to meet the person who is.

"Prin—" I cut off abruptly, because the last thing I want these strangers to know is my true identity. Sure, they've done nothing worthy of distrust, and their treatment of me now is evidence enough that my status likely wouldn't change their opinions of me. Now that most of the blur has left my eyes, I can clearly see that this room can only be a royal bedchamber. The walls and ceiling are made of wood and stone, but the intricate detail of carved flowers painted in colours that are nameless to me and accented with gold is more than enough evidence of the status of the individuals that sleep here. Are these roses? Flowers haven't grown in Lunae since I was a child, but roses were never among them. I only know of them from a book in Father's library.

"Prin?"

"Yes. Prin." It's better than 'Princess' anyway, though I feel foolish for not just going by Abby. Either way, this could be my chance to start over. When I don't return home, my family will think I'm dead. Sacrificed, just as Arabella's dream had predicted. No one will look for me. This could be my chance to start over with Jade—because he's not dead—and leave my royal title behind. I don't have to be a princess here, and he doesn't have to be Marked. We can be free. "I was Abilene's lady's maid. Abilene is—"

"We know who she is," the man says grimly. "Was she traveling with you?"

I think back to Teagan's torn body and my throat goes as dry as hers must be now. "Yes. She..."

"She didn't survive the attack." The woman finishes for me before sharing a nervous glance with the muscular man. "What were you doing in the forest?"

The lie comes easier than it should. "Lunae is starving. The king sent Abilene with an envoy to search for anyone who could help." I gaze around me again, knowing full well this is a palace. "Am I in Marein?"

"Marein is further South. You're in Rosewood." Rosewood? Where the stars is that?

"I need to speak to whoever is in charge. Your... King?"

The two speak silently to each other with another shared look before the woman stumbles into a nervous explanation. "His Highness, Prince Quinn is away at present, but he will return in seven or eight days."

"And the king and queen?" If they have a prince, they must have a king.

The man speaks this time. "Only Quinn remains." The informality of his phrasing isn't lost on me. This man must be close with the prince, but even Teagan would have never called me Abby to anyone other than me.

Oh, Teagan.

I shake the thought of her unseeing eyes from my mind. I will mourn her later. "Then I would like to speak with him when he returns. Where has he gone?" I know they won't tell me this. As an outsider, and a lady's maid at that, they have no reason to share details of their prince's life with me. It's odd, though. If his family is gone, why does he not call himself King? And why would he leave his kingdom for so long without a ruler? Perhaps they do things differently in Rosewood, but that's something we would never do in Lunae.

I also need to get my hands on a map and see exactly where I am, because as far as I knew, the forest was empty of civilization. A band of people surviving off the land, maybe. But a separate kingdom? There's no way my father knew about this. ...Or did he? Entering the forest was considered desertion and punishable by death. Could he have been hiding something? Could he have been hiding *this*?

The woman makes a sound of surprise, but it seems forced. “Oh, where are our manners? You’ve told us your name, but here we are prattling on without telling you ours.” I wouldn’t call what they’ve been doing prattling, but I wait for her to finish. “My name is Tess. I’m head of the castle staff. If you need anything at all, I’m your woman. And this here is Ruben. He found you in the woods.”

“You brought me here?”

“To the castle, yes.” Another oddly specific answer. What aren’t they telling me? “What do you remember?”

The details of the attack come back all too clearly. The screams, the Guardian torn in two, the sickening scent of blood.

The monster.

“There was a creature. It attacked us on the road.” It’s not a lie. They don’t need to know that I wasn’t traveling with the party.

“Did you see it?”

I shake my head and regret the motion instantly. “It moved too fast. What is it?”

Another shared look. “The reason Rosewood fell.”

“Are we safe here?”

Tess takes a seat on the edge of the bed and puts a gentle hand on mine. “You have nothing to fear so long as you stay out of the forest. The monster doesn’t come here.”

“I’m not worried about that. I just want to see Jade. Where is he?” Another look passes between them, but I recognize this one. Confusion. There must have been multiple survivors. “He’s my age with hair the colour of sand and striking green eyes.”

I wonder for a moment if they even know what sand looks like. I doubt they have much of it this deep in the forest. Even I’ve never been to the coast, but Teagan compared it to the arid patches of ruined soil blanketing Lunae. If Jade is in a room half as nice as this one, he must be losing his mind. I doubt he’s ever slept on an actual bed. Part of me hopes he hasn’t woken yet just so I could be there to see his reaction. If he were awake, he’d be here with me. Nothing would keep him away.

Tess squeezes my hand. “I’m so sorry. I thought you knew. You were the only survivor.”

It takes too long a moment to process her words. Her very, very wrong words. “No. No, he was right behind me. If you didn’t find him, then he must still be out there.” I swing the blanket off my legs and realize only then that I’ve been dressed in a white slip. “We have to find him. Where are my clothes?”

“Don’t get up. You were badly injured.”

I roll my eyes. What happened to ‘just a scratch?’ “If Jade is out there, I’m going.”

“I will search again, but you must stay here,” Ruben says. There’s pain evident on his face, and I know he thinks this is a fool’s errand. He’s already decided that Jade is dead, and that’s exactly why I can’t trust him to search.

“You don’t think you’ll find him.” The accusation flies fiercely from my lips, each word a jagged dagger meant to pierce him.

“There’s never much left to find.”

His words hit me with the same force the creature did when it knocked me from my horse. “You found me.”

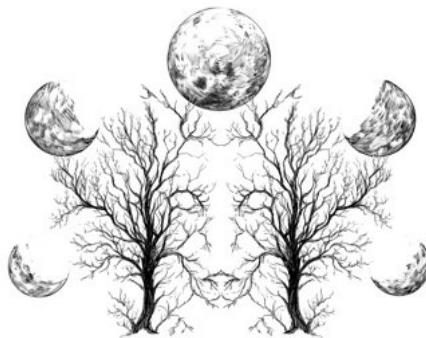
He sighs, but it’s one of submission. He can’t argue with that. I’m alive, and that means Jade could be, too. “We will look for your friend, but the forest is not safe for you. We cannot protect you if you leave the valley.”

Of course I want to search for Jade myself, but if we were to get attacked again, I could only

imagine the heartbreak he would feel knowing my death was because I was searching for him. No. Jade has proven himself time and time again that he's a survivor. He's probably on his way here now, dragging the monster's bloodied carcass behind him. So I'll wait for him. At least until the prince returns.

CHAPTER TEN

ABBY



I shift uncomfortably in the loose fitting dress. It's made of a modest brown cloth with a white lace bodice and tied around the waist, but even so, it's luxurious. It was the most casual dress in the wardrobe, though I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't have preferred a shirt and pants. When I step out from behind the changing screen, Tess smiles.

"You look lovely. It's a bit big on you, but it'll fill out once we get some meat on your bones."

I wonder if I'll be here long enough for that. I'd like to stay—after Ruben finds Jade, of course. The image of him in that tree flashes through my mind, but I shove it back with force. He's not dead. I know he's not.

"Is something wrong?" Tess asks. She must have caught my momentary grimace.

"It's just... This is a lot. This room, these dresses. Are you sure there isn't anywhere else I can stay? Even a tent outside—"

"Nonsense! The castle has plenty of room, and besides, Quinn would want you here."

I catch the casual usage of his name again. Maybe I'm overthinking it, but it's hard enough getting anyone to call me Abby in Lunae. Perhaps things are different here, but the fact that both people I've met in Rosewood have referred to the prince by first name alone can only mean one of two things. Either they don't respect him, or things are different here.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Certainly," she says as she fusses with the hem of my skirt. "I'd enjoy the conversation."

"Both you and Ruben called the prince by his name rather than his title. Is that customary here? Where I'm from, you could be executed for less." I probably didn't need to add that last bit, especially considering the way her face falls. "I'm only asking because I don't want to make a mistake when I meet him."

She visibly relaxes. "You should refer to him by his title, but he'll probably ask you not to. From there, it's your choice."

I nod, but then another question pops into my mind and I can't shut my mouth fast enough. "If it's just him left, why isn't he considered your king?" Perhaps there are traditions to be fulfilled, but the idea of that is strange. In Lunae, a prince can be crowned the moment a throne sits empty, but a princess must marry before she can be made queen. It's archaic, but that's the way things have always been. Things would be so different now if that weren't the case. My mother was royal by blood. If I had been born a son, I would have succeeded her to the throne. Imelda would have never been queen, and my new stepbrother wouldn't be heir. Because I'm a woman, I will never sit the throne that only my blood is destined for.

Tess' answer brings me out of that harsh reality. "A lot has happened in Rosewood. Quinn needs time. We all do."

"I understand," I say, though I really don't. By all rights, he *is* king. Refusing the title does nothing to serve his kingdom. And what kind of king spends more time away from his kingdom than he does with his people? The more I learn about this so-called prince, the less I like him. "Did the monster kill his parents? The same creature that attacked me?"

Tess' eyes fill with sadness. "It was five years ago. Please don't ask me to speak more of it. If you have questions, save them for Quinn."

My face goes hot. "I can't ask him that!" Nothing says 'please let me stay in your kingdom' like asking about the untimely deaths of his parents. Despite the years, this is still a fresh wound for Tess, so it's bound to be so much worse for the prince.

Tess' smile is weak, but it's there. "You will not offend him. Quinn is just..." She trails off with a sigh. "He's selective of whom he shares his stories with. I honestly have no idea if he will speak openly with you. We haven't had a visitor to Rosewood in some time."

So I'm not the first then. "Is that why you're treating me like royalty?" As far as they know, I'm a lady's maid. This room and these clothes are not fit for me.

She ignores the question. "No amount of fiddling is going to make this dress fit any better. Let's get you some dinner. We're all eating outside tonight, but I can have food brought to you if you'd prefer. If you want that wound to heal, you need rest."

The last thing I want to think about is being trapped behind walls. I'm not a prisoner here, and so I refuse to feel like one. "I'd love to join you." I pat the wound on my shoulder subconsciously. It's far from painless, but for food I can endure it.



Tess leads me through the castle. Down winding halls and dimly lit corridors. I'd assumed the castle was made mostly of stone, but now that I'm seeing more of it, wood seems to be the dominant material. Which makes sense, considering we're in the middle of a forest.

The castle itself is smaller than I'm used to, but larger than I expected. I can't believe I didn't know this was here. I try to pay attention as Tess points out the various rooms, but I can already imagine myself getting turned around in these darkwood halls. Library, dance hall, kitchen—where Tess tells me I can always help myself—main dining hall, throne room. She points each one out with equal enthusiasm. I let her set the pace, never once asking to stop or explore one of the aforementioned rooms—though I will most definitely check out that library at some point. It isn't until we come to a door covered in carved roses that my feet refuse to take another step.

"Something the matter?" Tess calls back to me when she realizes I'm no longer with her.

"What's behind these doors?" The double doors are more ornately decorated than any I've seen prior, but that's not what has me frozen in place. A scent so unbelievably intoxicating wafts out from behind it, and I know in my heart that there must be flowers—*actual flowers*—behind it.

"That area is off limits. You're free to go anywhere in the castle and on the grounds, but don't go beyond those doors."

"Where do they lead?" I pull in a deep breath and let the scent engulf me. To smell this strong, there must be hundreds of flowers on the other side. Maybe even thousands. It's only now that I

realize that I've been smelling this since I woke up, but this is where it's strongest.

Tess shifts her weight from side to side. "It's just a garden. Come, let's get you some food."

I don't move, and a few moments later I hear her sigh and then feel her standing beside me. "There are no flowers in Lunae," I say, the words not meant for anyone in particular. I have to see what's on the other side of those doors. I just have to.

"You'll see plenty outside, that I can promise you. There are other gardens."

I let her lead me away, though the gnawing need to see beyond those doors is still very much hammering away within my chest. I've never felt a pull like that before, and it's going to take a lot to get me to forget about it. Even as we move further away and the scent hangs thinner in the air, the unknown beyond that ornate door beckons me. Whatever garden produces a scent like that must be breathtakingly beautiful, and it becomes suddenly apparent that simply seeing a flower is no longer enough. I need to see *those* flowers.

After another short but gruelling walk, we step outside into the evening air. It's cool tonight and the smell of looming snow carries on the wind. It could be another week or two until we have the first snowfall, but it'll come all too soon. "Are those...?" I ask when I see them.

Tess laughs. "Have you really never seen one?"

"Not since I was a child," I say, crouching down beside a patch of small white flowers. I don't know the name for them, but they look nothing like the carved roses all over the castle. "I barely remember it, but I know they were yellow."

"We have plenty of yellow ones too, though you'll have better luck finding them in the daylight. If you're feeling up to it, you should walk the grounds tomorrow. Just don't go past the tree line."

For the first time, I really take in my surroundings. The sun must just be setting, but I can't see it through the trees. Still, there's just enough light in the air to cast a golden tinge over verdant land. There's grass, moss, and trees in every direction, and I can see from one end of the kingdom to the other from where I stand. It's small, consisting of only a castle with a city around it. 'City' might not even be the best word, as much of it is farmland speckled with wooden buildings. The trees encircle the valley in a near-perfect circle. Whoever built this place must have wanted to strike a balance between nature and human. This is a kingdom within a forest rather than a forest kingdom. I wouldn't have thought there was a difference before, but being here now, I can see it. The land beyond the trees belongs to the animals...

And the monster.

Can the prince really travel out there so freely? Where would he go? Lunae is the closest kingdom, and he certainly isn't going there. He could travel south to whatever remains of Marein, but there should be nothing but ruin. A pang of sadness comes like a punch to the gut when I think of it, because I'm reminded that Jade isn't with me and Teagan is dead.

"Are you alright?" Tess asks when my eyes begin to water.

"Yes. It's just the smoke."

The smoke from a large central fire isn't blowing in our direction, but she doesn't question my answer. I would have thought an open flame this large would cast too much of a smoky glow to stay hidden, but as I watch the swirling tendrils rise into the air, they dissipate into sky before they can stretch above the tallest trees. No one outside of the forest would ever know they were here.

The darkened trees look like ink stains against the pale orange sky. Not a sound stirs from the forest. Not a bird call, nor the scurry of a small animal. It's ominous, and yet I feel oddly at ease here. I'd been taught to both respect and fear the forest, but seeing it this way is an entirely new side to it.

We move to the fire, where fifty or sixty people sit and laugh around it. I expected them to go quiet

when they notice me, but instead I'm greeted with sounds of welcome.

"You're the girl!" a man as large as Ruben says as he offers me his hand. I take it, and mine disappears in the palm of his.

"Prin," I introduce myself. I can't risk a slip-up, so I need to get used to that name as well.

His face tightens for only a moment, but then softens into a smile. "I'm Ellis. Sit, please." He offers me his seat by the fire, and voices from all around call over to introduce themselves. I'll never remember these names, and I can't figure out why everyone is so excited to meet me. Tess said I wasn't the first visitor to Rosewood, so what makes me so special?

I'm handed a plate of vegetables and deer meat. I can't even remember a time when I didn't solely live off meat, so I greedily shove a forkful of a steaming orange something in my mouth. "What is this?" I ask when the sweet flavour hits me.

"Those are my carrots," a man a few seats away announces proudly. "Grew them myself."

"Samson, come off it. There's no telling whose carrots they are," another person says before turning to me. "We all work together to grow enough food so that we don't need to rely just on the creatures of the forest. Don't let Samson steal the credit."

The crowd laughs, and someone smacks the back of Samson's head. I can't help but wonder if this is how things always are here. The community is small—less than a hundred people, but they work together to make sure everyone has what they need.

Movement to my right catches my attention, and I turn to find a stranger standing just a bit too close. He's tall and thinner than the others, with brown disheveled hair. It's warm by the fire, but not warm enough to account for the sheen of sweat coating his face. Something about this man seems vaguely familiar, but I can't place it. He could be from Lunae, possibly a deserter who slipped away.

"Do I know you from somewhere?" I ask, trying to hide the nervous quaver in my voice. If this man is from Lunae, he can out me to everyone before I even have a chance to secure my place here.

He doesn't answer. He only stares, his eyes piercing into mine. Is he trembling? Before I can ask if he's okay, his head twitches fiercely to one side, and his expression turns pained for only a moment. I stand to move away from him, but relax when firm hands grip his shoulders.

"Let's go," Ellis tells him. His tone is firm, but not forceful. I watch as he leads the man away from the fire—and away from me.

Before I can ask what happened, Tess puts a hand on my uninjured shoulder. "That's Morgan. He's grappling with a sickness, but don't you worry yourself about it. It isn't spread through the air, so you have nothing to fear."

"Is he going to be okay?"

"Oh, yes. He'll be fine in a week or two." She gestures to my plate. "Eat up, and then we should get you to bed."

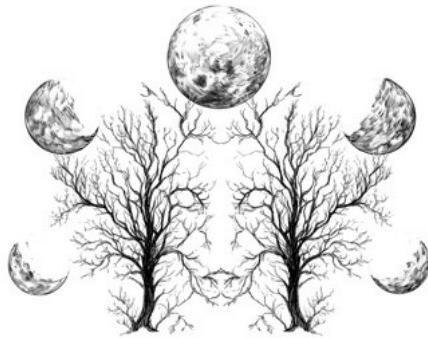
I do as she says and clean my plate because—when you've lived nearly your entire life on food rations, you eat what you can when you can. When I'm finished, I set the plate and fork down on the grass in front of me, but tuck the knife carefully into the sleeve of my dress. I have no reason not to trust the people here, but something about the way Morgan looked at me has me feeling much safer knowing I'll have something to defend myself with.

After dinner, I let Tess lead me back to the castle and then to my room, where I sit by the window and stare out across the valley. The waxing moon is visible now, illuminating the kingdom in a familiar glow.

Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howls.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

QUINN



“*Y*ou’re back,” Ruben says as he crosses the lawn towards me in wide strides. We’re close to the same height, but he gives the impression of towering over me just as he did when I was a boy.

“I take it you found what I left for you?” I didn’t know what to do with the girl, and I didn’t trust myself to stay in this form, so I’d carried her to the edge of the forest, and left her where someone was sure to find her. The fact that Ruben is this relaxed means she at least survived her injuries.

“I did. Tess patched her up.”

“Good,” I say, passing him on my way into the castle. “Has she said anything?”

“She’s trying to hide her identity. We’ve been going along with it.”

“That’s good. We may get more out of her that way. What name did she give you?”

“Prin.”

Prin? A slip, no doubt. So she didn’t plan to hide who she was, which means she has her own suspicions. We enter the castle and I take a left, meaning to take the stairwell that leads down to the dungeon, when I notice Ruben is no longer behind me. I turn to him. “What is it?”

“She’s not down there.”

“If she’s not locked up in a cell, then where are you keeping her?”

Ruben shifts his weight from one foot to the other, and his unease troubles me. He’s not usually like this. “Tess gave her Kaylee’s room.”

“*She did what?*” I almost shout the words, but manage to rein in my temper. Tess is a bleeding heart, so I shouldn’t be surprised, but Lunae is our enemy. Until I know why their princess is here, she needs to be treated as such.

“I told her you wouldn’t be happy, but she said locking her up was too much of a risk. With her wounds—”

“It’s fine,” I snap, spinning on my heel toward what was once my sister’s room. As far as I know, no one has been in there since her passing, and it’s the last place I would choose for an interrogation.

“There’s something else.” I don’t have the patience for this. “She thought she was in Marein.”

Mention of Marein has my blood running cold. This can’t be about what happened there. As far as Lunae is concerned, Marein is nothing but rubble. If getting answers from her wasn’t already my top priority, it sure as fuck is now.

When we reach Kaylee’s room, I don’t bother to knock. It only then occurs to me that the girl might not be dressed, but the only person I see when I enter is Tess. “Where is she?”

“Where are your manners?” Tess says, putting her hands on her hips. “You were raised better than

to barge into a lady's room." For just a moment, I think she might throw me out like she would have when I was a child, but instead she sighs. "I'm glad to see you home so soon."

There's a deeper meaning to her words, and I don't have the mental capacity to comment on it right now. "Where is she?" I ask again, my voice still harsher than necessary.

The girl steps out from the dressing room clad in one of Kaylee's dresses. It takes everything I have not to narrow my eyes at the offence and demand she take it off right here and now. "*She* is right here," she says, crossing her arms. Does she really believe no one will think her royalty when she speaks to people with that tone?

"Prin, I presume." I greet her with the name she'd given. Knowledge is power, and I'm not yet ready to share with her just how much I know. "You must not realize who I am, so allow me to introduce myself. I am Prince Quinn, ruler of Rosewood." It's been a long time since I had to refer to myself in such a way, and doing so now twists my stomach.

"I know very well who you are. Your Majesty." She tacked on the title as if it were an afterthought. "You've kept me waiting."

My eyebrows raise in genuine surprise. "Have I? Well, I apologize. Perhaps you'd care to accompany me on a tour of the castle?"

"I've already had a tour."

My eyes slide to Tess, who is no doubt responsible for this. I'll have to have a word with her later. "Is that so?"

"I do wish to speak with you, and a walk will do me some good." She wishes to speak with me? Well, this should be interesting. I can't see her father sending her here. He would sooner send an army if he discovered Rosewood's existence. No, he's not behind this.

I offer her my arm as a gentleman should and lead her through the halls. I'd really like to take her to the dungeon, but my parents' chambers are closer. "After you," I say as I pull open the door to a room I've been actively avoiding since my father's death.

When she realizes where I've brought her, her face goes white. "This is extremely forward of you. I think I'm going to have to decline this tour." She moves for the door, but I block her.

"We're not here for that." I can't blame her for assuming these were my rooms, but bedding her is the farthest thing from my mind. "You're going to tell me why you've come here, and I'll know if you lie to me." I take a step towards her, and she mirrors it with a step back.

"I woke up here. A creature in the forest attacked me." She keeps backing away until she bumps up against my father's desk, and I take the opportunity to close the space between us so she can't move from that spot.

"What were you doing in the forest?"

"The king sent Abilene in search of help. Lunae is starving, and—"

"Do you take me for a fool? That bastard would never send one of his daughters here." I expect her to flinch at the insult towards her father, but she keeps her composure. Either she agrees with the sentiment, or she's playing me.

"Well, he did."

"Liar!" I slam a fist down on the table. I mean only to startle her into talking, but it's not fear I see in her face. One second she's reaching behind her, and the next she has the point of a letter opener held against my throat.

"I suggest you step back, *Your Highness*."

It takes everything in me not to laugh. Not at her threat, but at the fact that it's made me feel more alive than I have since the curse. I can't remember the last time I felt such exhilaration coursing

through me, and if she weren't a Daughter of Lunae, I'd be tempted to take her right here and now. She's far too thin, but she's not unattractive. I'm sure Evan would have been pleased if he'd lived long enough to make her his wife. The thought of my brother has the growing bulge in my pants softening. He always was a cock block.

"Or what? Are you going to stab me?"

"Not if you give me what I want."

Finally, some answers. "And what might that be?"

"Freedom. Let me stay in Rosewood." For a moment, I can't say or do anything. Why would she want to stay here? Unless...

She's running—but why?

I move so fast that she has no hope of stopping me. When my hand wraps around her wrist, I twist it just enough so that she drops the blade without actually hurting her. The last thing I need is to leave a mark. I kick the letter opener away before I release her and take a few steps back so she can stop seeing me as an immediate threat.

"No." I can't give her what she wants.

"No?" She moves towards me now, but I hold up a hand in warning.

"You'll be returned to Lunae as soon as it's safe for you to travel." When exactly that will be, I can't be certain, but it *will* happen.

"I left my home in search of—" She pauses, as if rethinking her words. "I'm looking for a new home."

"You won't find it here." I can feel the annoyance building in me, and it's all I can do not to snap at her. This stupid girl. Even if she doesn't understand the curse on this place, she should at least sense the danger. Knowing Tess, she made her feel too welcome. Told her she was safe here. If I had to guess, she probably told her the monster doesn't enter the valley. Oh, how wrong she is.

"So that's it? Because the absent prince has a problem with me, I'm not welcome here?"

"Don't call me that," I say through gritted teeth.

"Why not? You are absent. You weren't here when I arrived, and no one knows how long you'll stay." Just what did Tess tell her?

"Not that. It's Quinn. *Just Quinn.*"

She rolls her eyes, and the action gives me pause. I don't think anyone has ever rolled their eyes at me. "Maybe I should call you coward instead."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. This kingdom has no ruler. Only a prince who runs from his responsibilities."

My temper flares and what little control I have right now wanes. "Like you're any better, *Princess.*" Shit. Well, there goes the upper hand.

She looks as if I'd just slapped her. "I—How did—"

It's my turn to roll my eyes. "You think I can't smell the royalty on you? Lavish soaps and conditioners, fine wines and clean linens." That's not exactly how I knew, but it's beside the point. She wasn't fooling anyone.

"I was Abilene's lady's maid. I was always washing her and—"

"I told you not to lie to me. If I'm a coward, then so are you. At least I'm here when I can be, while you're content with letting your people think you dead. Don't talk to me about responsibility."

She flinches at my words, but she doesn't back down. "You don't know what it's like there."

"You don't know what it's like here."

"If there's a problem, you have the power to change it! This is your kingdom. You don't need to

abide by the laws of your father.”

And just like that, the tight string of rage inside me snaps and all that’s left is heartbreak and shame. “Maybe if I had, I wouldn’t be in this mess.”

She looks away, and for a long moment neither of us speaks. I wish I was back in the forest. Every cell of my body vibrates with that desire—that need. It should be the other way around, but long have I been more monster than man. The full moon is still a week away, and yet here I stand. Human—and monster.

I sigh. “Tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Tell me why you don’t want to go home.”

She turns back to me, a faint reddening to her eyes. “Would you let me stay if I did?”

“No.” I can’t give her the answer she wants. The last thing I need is a war with Lunae, and keeping her here will do just that. She needs to leave before she realizes what this place is. If Evan was still alive...

“Then forget it.”

If only I could make her understand. “You can’t stay here. It’s not safe.” I’m not sure why I bother. If this was really just about keeping my people safe, I would end her life here and now, one way or the other. To let her leave with what she knows... But I know deep inside that I can’t do it. The monster let her live, and the reason for that terrifies me to my core. The only option that might keep everyone alive is if she goes home.

“So I keep hearing, but I’ve also heard that the monster doesn’t come within the valley.”

Damnit, Tess. I should have expected nothing less from her. Her intentions are good, but she’s made a real mess of this. “There are other dangers. Just do as you’re told and—” I can’t finish the sentence as the jolt runs through me. I suck in a breath and clench my teeth against it.

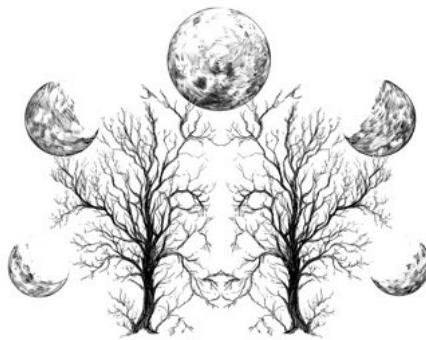
“What’s wrong with you?”

What isn’t wrong with me? “Nothing. Go back to your room.”

“Am I to be your prisoner then?”

That’s a good question. “Not if you stay out of trouble.”

CHAPTER TWELVE



The prince is an ass. How dare he compare my situation to his? Have I not done enough for my people? It's not like it did any good. The Commander came after me, which means the Marked are dead—and any hope of change died with them. And Jade...

Stop it! Jade is not dead!

No matter how many times I tell myself that, I'm less sure of its truth. If he survived, he would have come for me. Ruben said I was alone, which means either Jade is dead... or he left me there to save himself. I can't decide which is worse.

I push that possibility from my mind because I only have the energy to be angry with one man today. Quinn is a fool if he thinks I'm going to give up that easily. I'm never going back to Lunae. If I can't stay here, then I'll find Marein because if Jade is alive, that's where he'll be. Part of me wants to tell someone, maybe Tess if not Quinn, but there's no telling whose side they're on. Marein was destroyed, her people slaughtered and children stolen. My father covered it up, but did he work alone? I've never heard of Rosewood, but that doesn't mean he didn't know of its existence. I know nothing about these people, but that needs to change.

I'd planned on going back to my room, but turn on my heel when I recall the library. Maybe I'll find some information there. If the Marked somehow survived, the more I know about this place, the better. And if Prince Quinn wants to send me away, then I'd better get snooping.

After only a few minutes of walking, I wish that I'd paid more attention on the tour. All these halls look so familiar, and every time I think I know where I am, I end up somewhere entirely different. I turn yet another corner and find myself almost back where I'd started. Just ahead of me is the throne room. Since I'm not getting anywhere fast, I decide to check it out.

A long, woven carpet of greens, reds, and golds leads me to a set of carved wooden thrones. Unlike in Lunae, the thrones are of equal size and I can't tell which is meant for a king and which for a queen. Two gold crowns of equal beauty rest on a small table between them. Each appears to be formed from thorny flowers dipped in molten gold and molded to fit a head. The golden flowers match those carved on the thrones themselves, and without a doubt, I know these are roses. I've yet to see one, and, as if by the realization itself, I become aware of the potent scent that blankets Rosewood. It's near winter and only the most resilient of flowers remain, but the scent of that garden has to mean the roses are still in bloom. Even if they're not, I have to see them.

Prince Quinn can tell someone who cares if he has a problem. He said I'm not a prisoner as long as I keep out of trouble, and how much trouble could I get into in a garden?

With renewed purpose, I hurry from the throne room and resume my walk around the halls. It's

easier not to get lost when you follow your nose, but even then I make a few wrong turns. Eventually, after an embarrassing amount of time, I find myself in front of two elegantly carved doors that rival the thrones in their beauty and craftsmanship.

It occurs to me then that the door might be locked. What a silly thing that would be. I look to my left and then my right to be sure no one is watching. The last thing I need is for them to go running to the prince. It will be a while before I'll want to look upon his face again. He's offered me shelter and I should be grateful, but I see right through him. He wants me gone, and he's probably only letting me stay until I recover to keep up appearances. His people don't seem to have a problem with him—despite his lingering absences. One could argue that they know him better than I do, but first impressions speak volumes. If I could go home I would, but what's left for me there? A crown that isn't mine, an army that serves a ruthless king, and a lying father with a heart that holds no love for me.

I bear enough scars.

The doors look heavier than they are, and swing open at the softest touch, revealing a sea of red and green. I'd thought the scent was strong before, but being face to face with so many flowers shows just how wrong I was. Why would such beauty be hidden away behind stone walls and wooden doors?

The doors fall closed behind me. The garden is set in a wide circle with individual stones forming a path that spirals into the center. Densely packed flowers—roses that appear ashen on the outside with centers redder than blood, at least a thousand of them—line the walkway.

I follow the path, stepping from one stone to the next and carefully avoid trampling any roses that droop over the edge of the walkway. At the very center sits a large altar. The stone is grey and smooth—not a carved rose in sight—and charred as if something had been burned atop it recently. The stone slab is large enough to fit a person, but that's not what sits atop it now.

I touch the fur and know instantly that it's my shawl. "What the stars?" I say to no one. There's a chill in the air, and a shiver runs through me. I don't know why my shawl was put here, but it shouldn't have been. I drape it over myself and follow the spiral path back out of the expansive circle, hands spread out on either side of me to touch the flowers as I pass. Their soft petals feel almost non-existent, offering only the faintest of tickles against my fingertips, softer even than silk.

I spot a bench against the low stone wall and move to claim it. I'm not ready to leave the garden yet, but before I can take a seat, a thunderous bang has me nearly leaping out of my own skin. I whip around to face the source and find the wooden doors thrown open with a fuming Quinn between them. His fists are clenched tight, and the pure rage on his face has me backing further away.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he shouts at me. Tess appears in the door behind him, but the only move she makes is to bring a hand to her chest.

"I—I just wanted to see the garden," I stammer. His anger has me at a loss for words, and my fight-or-flight instincts are firing. Something about his demeanour is raw and animalistic. It has me feeling like a prey animal backed into a corner, or a creature of the Lunar Hunt seconds from meeting a spear.

"Get out." He takes a step to the side to leave a clear path for me to leave. When I don't move, his face reddens and a fist slams against one of the open doors with such force that I'm surprised he didn't punch right through it. "Get out!"

That show of aggression is all it takes to have me moving, and before I know it, I'm flying down the corridor. I don't know where I'm going. Not my room, that's for sure. When I reach the main exit, I don't stop. I thrust the doors open and sprint into the late afternoon sun. It's warmer here than in the

garden, but that might have something to do with the slamming of my heart.

I skid to a stop when I reach the tree line. Enough people have told me not to cross it, but what's the point of staying here if Quinn is only going to send me back? I won't go back to Lunae. I won't!

Before I can make a conscious decision to bolt into the forest, a low growl all but stops the thundering of my heart. The shadows within the trees are dark, but something darker still moves between them. Two shimmering eyes blink back at me, and for each step back I take, the animal takes one of its own.

"Relax," I tell myself. "It won't cross the tree line."

The massive wolf steps out of the shadow and into the clearing, and I was a fool to think it wouldn't. The monster doesn't leave the forest, but this isn't the monster. This is a wolf, and I'm its prey.

My eyes dart around, but there's no one to help me this time. Most people will be working the fields right now, and the nearest one is far enough away that I'd be lucky if anyone heard me scream. This is too much like the Lunar Hunt. Lunalissa had meant for me to be a sacrifice, and here she is again to claim me. I don't know what I ever did to the Goddess for her to want me so badly, but what I do know is that I won't go without a fight.

I bend to retrieve the small blade tucked into my boot, and the wolf snaps its teeth in response to the action. The dark brown animal crouches low, and thick globs of drool drip from its open jaws. Its teeth glisten in the sun, and I imagine them red with my blood. I raise my blade as it readies to pounce, but feel myself thrown sideways before it lunges.

I brush back the hair from my eyes to find Quinn on the ground in front of me, the wolf atop him. It sinks its teeth into his shoulder and tears at the flesh as a cry—more frustrated than pained—escapes the prince.

"Quinn!" I call to him. What the fuck is he doing?

"Get back to the castle!" The wolf snaps at him again, but he redirects its teeth.

I take a step towards them, waiting for a clean shot to drive my blade into the animal's back. There's no telling if it'll do anything, but I can't leave the prince to die.

"Damnit," he growls when he sees me raise the blade. He kicks hard with his legs, and just manages to get the wolf off him long enough to jump to his feet in an impressively smooth motion. "Run!"

I obey this time, and take off towards the castle. I spot Ruben with two other men near the edge of the forest, and nearly crash into him. "What's wrong?" he barks, panic shining in his eyes.

"It's Quinn!" I can't believe that bastard didn't take his own advice. I thought he was right behind me.

Panic shifts to concern. "Did he hurt you?" His eyes brush over me as if looking for any sign of injury.

"There's a wolf! It's going to kill him!"

First panic, then concern, and now calm understanding. Despite my urgency, Ruben visibly relaxes. "He'll be fine."

"How can you say that?!"

He ignores me and turns to one of the men with him. They both look amused, as if their prince getting mauled by a wild animal is a spectator sport. "Can you make sure she gets inside safely? Tess will meet you."

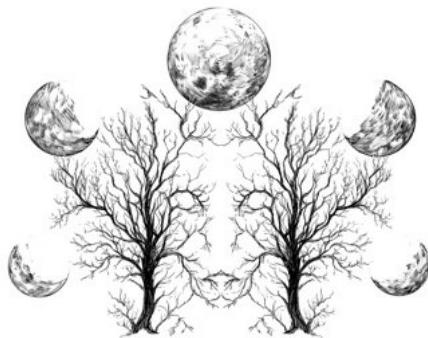
The man nods and reaches for my arm, but I yank it away from him and hold my ground. "What about Quinn?"

"I'll check on him if you go inside."

This is unbelievable. Does no one care what happens to him? It wouldn't exactly surprise me if they didn't. I've known him all of one day and already I can't stand him, but no one deserves to die like this. And—despite everything—he did just save my life. Without another word, I turn away from Ruben and storm back towards the castle with my escort following close behind.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ABBY



My tea has long since gone cold, and sitting still is impossible. Quinn could be dead, and no one seems to care. I can't help but wonder if that's somehow my fault. These people are forest dwellers, so of course they'd be accustomed to wild animals. Did I not convey the severity well enough? Perhaps I should have said Quinn's throat was about to be ripped out.

An image of Teagan flashes through my mind at the thought, and it takes everything to force it back. I can't cry for her—not yet. My heart slams against my chest in rapid succession and my lungs fight to match it. My breaths come too fast and provide too little air. It only takes a brief moment of gasping to have my head spinning. I'm going to be sick, or worse.

The click of the door opening makes me jump and momentarily halts my hyperventilating as Tess scuttles in. I'd expected to see her with more tea, but her hands are empty. That can only mean one thing.

I leap off the bed and nearly stumble, still dizzy from my reeling insides. "Did they find him?"

She raises her hands in a calming gesture that does little to calm me. "He came back on his own." She moves to the table beside the bed and purses her lips at the still full cup. "You didn't drink your tea."

"I don't care about the tea. Where is he?"

Her brows crease as she studies me. "He's in his chambers, but he will see no one. I told him you were uninjured, but he asked me to check on you again all the same."

"Probably to make sure I'm still here," I mumble. "If he wishes to know how I am, then he can see for himself. Take me to him." I move for the door before she has the chance to refuse me.

I thought she'd at least try to argue—which wouldn't work—but instead she leads me to a stone staircase at the end of the corridor. "Up there," she points. "You're on your own if you try to see him now."

"Does he frighten you?"

"Frighten? No. Quinn has always had a temper. It's been dormant for a while, but you seem to have a knack for bringing it out. Forgive me if I don't care to witness that."

The staircase spirals upwards what must be three floors before stopping at a closed door. Of course he would want to spend his minimal time here in a tower well away from everyone else. It doesn't surprise me in the slightest.

I bang my fist against the door three times and wait for a response. There isn't one, though I know he's in there. If he thinks he can ignore me after what just happened, he has another thing coming. "Let me in or I'll stay out here all night," I warn, banging on the door again.

I hear footsteps now that stop just on the other side of the door, as if he's weighing his options. I let him, because I can wait as long as it takes. After the distinct clicks of five separate locks, the door swings open. Quinn stands shirtless in the doorway, blood running down his arm and chest from the bites on his shoulder. Aside from that, he seems relatively unharmed. His hair is tousled and there's dirt on his face, but if he had a shirt on, it might look as if he didn't just have a fistfight with a wolf.

"You're alive," I say matter-of-factly.

"You sound disappointed." His clipped words match my tone.

"Maybe a bit."

His eyes lock onto mine for a long moment before he takes a step back to allow me inside. I hurry past him to the far side of the round room to glance out the thin slit of a window. This has to be the highest point of the castle, and, with the sun setting, I think I can just make out the palace in Lunae, moonstone glinting in the distance. He speaks before I can ask.

"Do tell, Princess. What have I done to offend you so?" He bows mockingly, and a flicker of pain flashes across his face. Serves him right.

I notice that he's left the door open, and a small part of me is thankful for that. I don't want to be behind closed doors with him any more than he wants me invading his space. Or, perhaps, this is his way of telling me not to linger. I chew my lip for a moment, looking for the right words. There's a lot I'd like to say to him, and very little of it is friendly. Considering the fact that he did just save my life, I decide to make an effort to be kind. After all, I threatened to stab him with a letter opener when we first met.

"You ordered me to leave."

"I told you to get out of the garden."

"That's not what it sounded like. Maybe you should learn to be more specific." I'm well aware of the tightening of his hands into fists. I shouldn't push him, but who does he think he is? He can't speak to me that way.

"Take off that shawl."

"Excuse me?" What is it about this shawl?

He takes a step closer and squares his shoulders. "Take it off."

I resist the urge to press my back against the wall, and instead take a step towards him, crossing my arms. "What was it doing in the garden?"

"That's not your concern."

"I think it is, seeing as it's my property."

His eyes glint in the light from the three flickering candles that illuminate the simple room. "The skin of a wolf belongs to no one but the wolf who bore it. Now take it off."

"The wolf who bore it tried to kill me."

"I wonder why," he mutters under his breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Please, just take it off." The fight is gone from his voice, and all that's left is the genuine plea of a broken man.

"Since you asked nicely." I slip it over my head and lay it gently on his bed. Even the bed in my chambers is bigger than this, and far more luxurious. "Do you really sleep here?"

His brows crease together. "Yes?"

"Is that a difficult question?" I remind myself that I'm trying to be nice, but such a thing just doesn't seem possible when talking to him.

He shifts from one foot to the other, clearly uncomfortable with this sudden line of questioning. "Yes, I sleep here."

"So you didn't give me your chambers?" Mine are fit for royalty whereas this tower is... I don't

know who it's fit for.

"I did not. They belonged to someone who no longer needs them."

I nod before gesturing to the door and its ridiculous amount of locks. "Who are you trying to keep out?" When he doesn't answer, I let out a long sigh and point to the bed. "Sit down."

His expression morphs into something that could almost be amusement. "You're giving me orders now?"

I mimic his earlier mocking bow and wait for him to do as he's told. He takes a stiff seat on the edge of the bed, his long legs bent at the knees and parted only slightly. He doesn't trust me enough to relax in my presence, which is fine. I can't say I'm all that relaxed, either. I could just walk out that door and leave him to his reclusive self, but my eyes keep moving to the torn flesh of his shoulder and my stomach roils with guilt.

"That's my drink," he says in protest when I take an open bottle from a small table and pour the dark liquid onto a bloodstained cloth he was almost certainly using before I disturbed him.

I ignore him and press the damp cloth to his shoulder. He hisses at the sting of it and leans away from me, but I refuse to relent. "Don't be such a child."

"This is wildly unnecessary," he says, but stills to allow me to work. He does, however, snatch the bottle from my hand and pull in a long drink. I let him have it.

The wound isn't bleeding nearly as much as I thought it was, and the thin trails of molten ruby down his arm and chest have almost completely dried. Also on the table is a bowl of water and a pile of clean strips of cloth—no doubt left here by Tess when he refused her aid. I dip the rag into the water and then run it down the length of his torso. Neither of us speaks, and if he still wants me to leave, he doesn't say it. When all traces of blood are gone, I tie a fresh linen strip under his arm and around the wound. I have to wrap another all the way around his chest in order to cover the shoulder properly, but he gives me no trouble. He sits stone still, only moving to lift an arm when needed or to take another swig from his bottle.

Through the entire process, he stares at the wall, refusing to meet my gaze or show any sign of discomfort or annoyance. The only time he reacts at all is with a quick wince when I tie the fabric. I can't say I've done this before, but I'm satisfied with my work. I'm sure Tess can fix it later if need be. If he allows it, that is.

When I'm finished, he doesn't thank me. I didn't thank him for risking his life for me either, so I guess that makes us even. "I should go," I say after another long moment.

"Back to your room, I hope." With that statement, the anger is back. Whatever momentary peace we'd found is gone, and once again, we're at odds with each other.

"Where else would I go?"

He doesn't answer, which is probably for the best. I move for the door, and notice for the first time the item tucked beside it against the wall—a broken bow with a distinctive strip of fabric tied to it.

My breath catches in my throat and the dizziness returns. "Where did you get this?"

"The woods. Did you know the huntsman who carried it?"

I bite my lip hard enough to taste blood to stop the flowing of tears, but there's no hindering them this time. The bow that could only be Jade's is now covered in a splattering of red. If this is here... If Quinn found it abandoned...

"I'm sorry," he says, only steps behind me now.

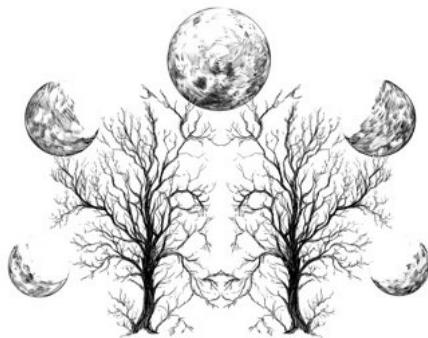
I don't turn to face him. I can't. I cradle the bow in my arms and bolt down the spiral staircase. I can feel his eyes on me, but I know he won't follow. The blur of tears makes it nearly impossible to

navigate the narrow spiral, but somehow I make it to the bottom without breaking a leg. The corridor is empty now, and I'm glad for that. Tess and the others are likely gathered by the communal fire for dinner, but I don't have it in me to join them. Whatever hunger I may have felt earlier is gone, and all that's left is a raw emptiness greater than even starvation.

Jade is dead, and I'm alone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

QUINN



I shut the door and slide all five locks into place, feeling like the biggest of assholes. Why didn't I hide that bow? I knew it belonged to her traveling companions, and I'd been planning to return it to her. But not like this. She shouldn't have had to find out this way. Ruben said she ordered him into the woods to search for her friends—or one in particular, anyway. I don't need to ask him what he found. Even with the haze of broken memories, I know what the monster did to them.

What I did to them.

Part of me wishes I could remember more, and the other half wants to drink myself into oblivion so I can forget. Forget the torn flesh and potent scent of blood hanging thickly in the air, the metallic taste coating my tongue. I can almost taste it now.

I sit back down on the bed and bring the bottle to my lips. It's empty, but even a drop or two will help to distract the senses. I run a hand along the coarse pelt beside me, fingers running through long bristles of hair. Is this what saved her?

Her voice plays again through my mind, that desperate '*please*,' and I know with certainty that the answer is no. If anything, the pelt would have made the monster more likely to tear through her. No, what saved her is the fact that she somehow reached me in that state. No one else has bypassed the monster and spoken to the man within, and the memory of it still has me shaken. Her words, too ghostly to have been spoken aloud, still haunt me. '*Please. Please, no. Don't kill me.*'

I should tell her the truth, or at least part of it. Time is running out, and if she's still here when the moon is at its fullest... I let out a sudden roar that surprises even me, and launch the bottle across the room. It shatters when it connects with the wall. I sigh in defeat and stand from the bed, crouching down to pick up the shards.

Every minuscule movement I make tugs at the bandages, and the sting is a constant reminder that I didn't thank her. I *should* have thanked her. From the moment she stepped foot into my woods, she's been a thorn in my side, but she didn't have to patch me up. The wound would have healed quickly—a day or two at most—but still. Have I shown her that same kindness even once?

I collect the last shard, somehow managing not to cut myself, and pile them safely into the now reddened rag. The basin of water and strips of cloth were here waiting for me, as if Tess had known I wouldn't let her tend to my shoulder. Even now, after everything I've done to her and the others, they continue to serve me in the few ways they can.

I wish they wouldn't.

I'm little more than a monster now, and no monster deserves a crown. I'm not their prince, and I'm most certainly not their king. My stomach lurches at the thought of my father's crown slick with

blood, and I lean over the basin, heaving dryly. It's a reminder that I haven't eaten since returning, and the thought of my last meal does nothing to stop the retching.

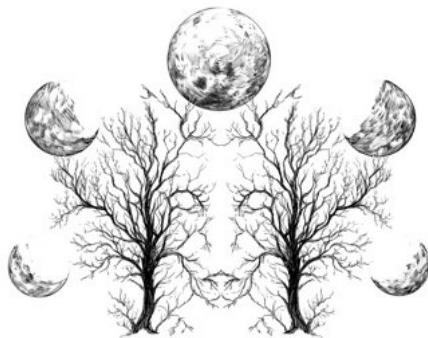
It's always like this when I return to this form. The monster's appetite sickens me, but it's far easier when I'm fairly certain it hasn't taken human life. It's harder to reclaim my temporary humanity when I know beyond a doubt that I not only took a life, but devoured it.

My neck arches when the sudden jolt radiates through me, and I suck in a breath through my clenched teeth. Every so often, my bones shift within me, and whenever that jolt fires, I feel as if the change is coming. It still could.

The girl asked about the locks on the door. They aren't meant to keep someone out—they're meant to keep me in.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ABBY



Deep crimson flows from Teagan's torn throat like a coursing river after a heavy rain. The ever-growing pool of blood flows out around her, turning brown soil scarlet. It spreads too far, too fast, with no sign of stopping. I drop to my knees beside her and press my hands against the wound. Her blood leaks out between my fingers as if they were only a mild hindrance.

"You can't save her." I know that voice. I snap my gaze up to find Jade watching me with cool sadness. "And you can't save me." In the time it takes me to blink, a long four-lined gash spreads down the length of his chest. It takes only moments for his blood to mingle with hers.

"This can't be happening," I say, desperate to change what I cannot. "Tell me how to save you."

He looks down at the flayed chest that matches his back. "This is all your fault."

I blink and again the image changes. Jade is on his back, sprawled along a thick tree branch high above me. Blood falls like rain below him as he angles his head to face me. Emerald eyes lock onto mine—both alive and not alive, seeing and unseeing.

"Your fault," he says again.



I awake with such force that I'm flung from the bed. Soft rays of morning sun stream through the window and illuminate the room, though the light does little to comfort me. Nightmares have plagued me for years, but somehow this is worse. Witnessing Jade's torture over and over again night after night is nothing compared to reliving his death. It seems I didn't have to witness it for my brain to concoct an image itself.

I climb to my feet and wrap the blanket around myself. There's a chill this morning, and I can smell snow on the wind. It won't be long now before the first of it falls.

There's no telling how much I slept last night. Not enough, of that I'm certain. After leaving Quinn's tower, I stayed up for a long time, alternating between staring at the wall and screaming into a pillow. I should get up, but I want nothing more than to stay in bed. There's an emptiness within me that's colder than even the longest of winters. This isn't how things were supposed to be. Leaving Lunae had been a dream come true, but it's turned into nothing but a nightmare. I have my freedom, but at what cost?

A quick knock on my door pulls me from my thoughts. With a groan, I stand from the bed and wrap

the blanket tighter around myself against the shiver radiating through me. Anyone could be on the other side of that door, and if it's Quinn, I'm not about to give him the satisfaction of seeing me in a nightgown.

I breathe a small sigh of relief when I pull open the door and see a young girl. She can't be older than ten, but her youthful features have a ruggedness to them. I suppose that's to be expected when you live immersed in nature.

"Princess Abilene," she says, bowing before I can stop her. "I have a note for you."

"It's just Abby." I yawn the words as I take the note. She watches me, and I wonder if she expects me to tip her. I would, if I had any money. Such things haven't mattered in Lunae for some time. Food became a currency in itself. "What's your name?"

"I'm Fern." A fitting name for someone who grew up in the heart of the forest. "Are you going to read that?" She seems more interested in the folded paper in my hand than conversation with me. So it's not coin she wants, it's gossip. Some subtlety would do her some good, though I suppose that skill is learned.

I unfold the letter, fully intending to make up something worth reporting, but when my eyes fall to the signature, I can't think about anything but the words written in a surprisingly elegant script.

Abilene,

*When you're feeling up to it, please join me in the dining hall.
There are things to say.*

~ Quinn

And thank you. For last night.

That last line looks as if it was scrawled in a hurry, or was an afterthought. I could ignore his invitation. It interferes with my plans of staying horizontal all day, and taking him up on his offer means that I'll have to see him. My stomach flutters at the thought, but only for a moment. Still, that small moment was the first thing I've felt since finding out that Jade was dead. Even fighting with the absent prince has to be better than staying confined to this room. I may as well be back in Lunae if I'm so intent on being a prisoner.

Another thought occurs to me then. Jade may be gone, but there's no guarantee that all of the Marked are. If any of them are alive, they'll be heading to Marein and might come through this way. Their cause is my cause now, and maybe there will be valuable information to get out of the prince. After all, Rosewood shouldn't exist. There are secrets here, and I've got nothing better to do than unravel them.

"Abby?" the girl squeaks nervously, and I look up from the note to meet her gaze. "Would you care to offer a reply?"

"Tell the prince to stop calling me Abilene. Tell everyone." If I hear that name one more time...

"And what of his request?"

I sigh. I'm in no state to be in public right now, so I'm going to need some time to rectify that. "I'll meet him in an hour."

She bows again and then scurries off down the corridor and out of sight. She's the first child I've

seen here, and I can't help but hope that she has at least one friend to play with. Children are rare in Lunae because there's hardly enough food as it is. Many new mothers have trouble producing milk, and without the ability to feed livestock... Many choose to take precautions against pregnancy. The only reason my stepmother was able to deliver such a healthy son was that she'd taken it upon herself to triple her food rations. She would deny it, of course, but I saw the food she ate. She made no secret of it, but to accuse a queen of the same theft that would demand the execution of a commoner would not bode well for the accuser.

I boil a pot of water in the small fireplace that is somehow still burning despite my ignoring it all night. It only takes two pieces of wood to have it roaring again. When the water is warmed just enough, I pour in far too much soap. Bubbles fly as a familiar aroma overtakes me. Of course they would use roses in their soaps. Who wouldn't want to smell like that garden?

It takes a fair while to scrub myself clean with just a washcloth, but a proper bath isn't an option. Back home, Teagan would draw a bath for me every night before bed. As shameful as it is, I wouldn't even know where to begin going about getting the water for it here. It would have probably been easier if I'd been stuck in some small hovel out amongst the people.

When I'm as clean as I'm going to get, I explore the wardrobe. I'd only skimmed through the dresses in my search for something as plain as possible yesterday, but this time I can't bring myself to care. A dress is a dress, and as long as it covers the important parts, I couldn't care less which one I end up in.

I choose at random, pulling out a quaint blue number accented by white lace and ribbon. The shoes don't fit me, but I've never been much of a fan of heels, anyway. The dress is long enough to hide the flats I'd worn when I arrived, so I doubt anyone will notice. Whoever this dress was made for must be at least a few inches taller than me, and a much healthier weight. I wonder how long it would take to rid myself of a lifetime of malnutrition.

An hour hasn't quite passed, but I head to the dining hall, anyway. I don't mind waiting, and being out of that room will be good for me. I'm not a prisoner anymore, and I intend to take full advantage of my freedom.

When I reach the hall, I find I'm not the first one there. Quinn is standing not too far off, with Ruben by his side. They seem to be engaged in a hushed, yet heated discussion. I move a bit closer. Not to listen in, though their conversation does better reach me now. The prince requested my presence, and so here I am. That doesn't mean I have to interrupt them.

"Tess said you wouldn't let her examine you," Ruben says, folding his thick arms across his chest. Quinn looks so small compared to him, and yet there's an air of authority to him that definitely signifies status. There would be no questioning which one of these men is running things, despite their difference in size. That's not to say that Quinn is lacking. Seeing him without his shirt last night had been more than enough proof of that.

"Because there was no need. It was nothing." He sounds tired, as if he too didn't sleep much last night. I wouldn't be surprised if his shoulder is bothering him. My own hasn't yet healed, and the burn of it has only worsened. I might have to let Tess look my wounds over again, though I'm sure it's just irritated from my fall yesterday.

"I'm not talking about last night. You've never been back so long." There's an emphasis on 'back' that seems to stir something in Quinn and has his face hardening.

"I'm fine." His words are even more clipped than before.

"It's the girl, isn't it? Her being here—"

"It's not the girl."

And just like that, things get awkward. I let out a small cough so they know I'm here. "Good morning Ruben. Quinn." I don't know why I greeted Ruben first. If the protocols here are anything like they are in Lunae, then I just snubbed the prince. *And it felt fantastic.*

"Abby," Ruben says with a slight nod. I guess Fern really did tell everyone. I'll have to find a way to repay her. "You're looking lovely this morning, though I'm sure there was no need to go to so much effort for breakfast. Quinn certainly didn't." He elbows the prince in the side.

Quinn's face has gone pale, though it's not anger I'm seeing there. He doesn't even seem to have noticed the massive elbow to his gut, only absentmindedly rubbing the area with a hand. After an uncomfortably long moment, he clears his throat. "Thank you for coming."

He's being unusually formal. "Is something wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I..." He pauses to find the words, only speaking again when his gaze falls to the floor. "You took me off guard. That was my sister's favourite dress." *His sister.*

"I didn't know you had a sibling."

"Siblings." He doesn't elaborate further, nor do I push him. Tess had told me that Quinn was the last living royal, which means that when the monster killed his parents, it killed his siblings, too. Arabella and I might not see eye to eye on most things, but losing her would be unimaginable. I wonder if that's what she's feeling now. There's a good chance she knows I'm still alive. If she saw this in a vision, would she tell our father? Or would she let me go? I thought I knew my sister fairly well, but that's a question I couldn't hope to answer. She was never exactly my ally, but she never once tattled on me when I snuck out of the palace even though she blatantly disapproved of my relations with some of the Guardians.

Quinn leads me to the longest table in the hall. It's the furthest into the room, centered against the back wall. We have to pass eight other tables—four on each side—that are about half the length of the head table. There are two place settings laid out on opposite ends of the table. Does he expect us to shout across at each other? Surely this is a bit excessive.

Only seconds after we're seated, two servants appear, carrying a large assortment of food each. A tray is placed in front of both Quinn and me, and as quickly as they'd appeared, we're left alone again. I didn't even notice Ruben leave, but he too is gone. The air suddenly feels heavier, as if the weight of unsaid words is a tangible thing, applying immense pressure in on us from all sides.

Once we're alone and seated comfortably, Quinn finally speaks. "I trust you slept well."

Your fault. Jade's words from my nightmare flash through my mind, and it takes everything I have to force the memory from my thoughts. "It was fine."

Another long stretch of uncomfortable silence ticks by. "The boar bacon is quite good. You should try some." Talking about food is as bad as chatting about the weather. I'm starting to wish I never left my bed.

"Regular pigs too good for you?" I'd meant that as a joke, but his face falls.

"We can't keep livestock. It draws in the wildlife." He doesn't have to say it, but I know he's referring to the monster as well. Tess said it doesn't come into the valley, but how else would it have eradicated the royal family? Something isn't adding up.

I lift a bite of bacon to my mouth, and it's delicious. Part of me hates that he's right, but when is bacon not delicious? "What did you want to talk about?"

"Ruben will escort you home today."

I drop the remaining bit of bacon onto my plate. "You're sending me away?"

"I'm returning you to your home."

"Lunae is a prison, not a home." I hate how panicked my voice sounds, but this isn't the time to

worry about what he thinks of me. I can't go back there.

"You're not the only person who feels a prisoner in their own home. You're still a Daughter of Lunae, and you'll be missed. The last thing Rosewood needs is a war."

I can't contain my laugh. "My father wouldn't declare war over me. He doesn't even know this place exists." At least, I don't think he does.

"And what do you think will happen when he finds out? You're the fucking princess." I'm taken aback by the harshness of his words.

"I'm third in line for the throne. I'm not missed."

His anger fades to exasperation. "This is a matter of safety. I thought you'd see that after what happened yesterday."

"And I thought you invited me to breakfast so you could apologize."

"I will not have that argument with you again."

"Fine," I snap, standing a little too quickly. I feel lightheaded as a result, and I wish I'd eaten more before letting him get to me. "But I'm not going back to Lunae."

He mirrors my movement and stands as well. "Yes, you are!" His words thunder across the space between us as if he were standing right next to me.

I take a hurried step to leave, desperate to get away from him, but the world shifts from under me. One second I'm storming away, and the next I'm falling. I expect to hit the stone floor with force, but a firm softness breaks my fall.

"Abby?"

I open my eyes to see Quinn's face only inches from mine. When did I close my eyes? "Let me go," I say, but it comes out as a muffled string of barely coherent words.

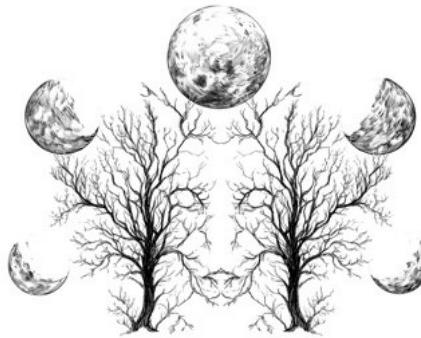
"What's wrong?" Worried eyes search mine as if he'll find the answer there.

My mouth won't work, but I want to tell him that he's what's wrong. My vision fades again just as an impossible wave of fatigue washes over me—consumes me. My head flops against his chest on its own accord, and if I wasn't feeling so awful, I would be downright embarrassed.

"Get Tess!" I hear him shout before his words disappear and all that's left is an empty void equal to that of the one inside me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

QUINN



“I told you to wait outside,” Tess says with a hand on her hip. Her other hand is preoccupied with brushing a wet cloth across the girl’s forehead. She’s damp, and it’s more than just the cloth. A fever, no doubt, and with that knowledge comes a fierce jab to my gut. The last time I saw a fever take such a grip over someone...

“What’s wrong with her?” I work to hide the concern in my voice, but Tess knows me too well. She sees right through it, but pretends she doesn’t for my benefit.

She weighs her words, chewing at the corner of her lip. “A fever has taken her.” She’s tiptoeing around the issue because she knows where my thoughts are.

“I can see that. What caused it?” She doesn’t answer this time, but her hesitation is answer enough. I did this to her. “Her shoulder.”

She nods. “The wound has festered. She must have been feeling quite unwell before she collapsed.”

I cross the room toward her. “And you missed it?” It’s not fair to take it out on her, I know that, but a Daughter of Lunae won’t die on my watch. I’m just as guilty of overlooking the signs. She was with me, but I took her pale face and sweat-slickened skin for anger.

“We couldn’t have known how she would react to—” She cuts off abruptly, and again I know why. No one has survived an attack without being bitten. We know the bite brings about the change, but it’s entirely possible that damage from the claws has an effect as well. Not that the monster would need anything else to make it more deadly.

“What can we do?”

“I’ve cleaned out the wound as best I can, so all there is to do is wait for the fever to break.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

She doesn’t answer, and I know she’s thinking of my mother. I claim the seat beside Abby and resist the urge to take one of her small hands in mine.

“You don’t have to stay,” Tess says, and it’s a kindness. She knows better than anyone what trauma I’m reliving just by being in this room.

“You know I do.” This is our way. When a member of the crown takes ill, another must sit with them. Abby may not be a princess of Rosewood, but her royal blood is more potent than mine. It would be wrong not to stay with her so long as I’m able, and more than that, I need to make up for a mistake I made years ago.

“Would she want you to?”

I blow a small burst of air through my nose in what could almost be a laugh. I’m not certain I

know how to laugh anymore. “Probably not.” I stare down at Abby. Her face is tense with pain and every so often her eyes flutter as if they want to open. There’s no telling if she’s awake, but even if she were, this would feel but a dream to her.

“There is something else we could do.”

My eyes snap up to Tess and my hands form fists around handfuls of blanket. “We’re not doing that.”

“The scratch could kill her. This could be the only way to ensure her survival.”

“I won’t damn her the way I damned all of you.”

Abby squirms a moment before sinking deeper into her pillow. I can’t stop my hand from taking hers, and it feels so thin and frail. I knew that the people of Lunae were suffering. It’s plain to see on her face, but feeling the bones only just beneath her skin has my own burning with fury. Not at their turmoil, because that’s not my problem. No, this rage is for myself. If I send her back to that, will I be sentencing her to a slow but certain death?

My neck arches suddenly, and I suck in a sharp breath. The jolts shouldn’t come this frequently, but I also shouldn’t be in this form. It’s only fair that the monster would tug at its chains and resent its early imprisonment.

“Quinn.” Tess’ face is stern. “Get some fresh air.”

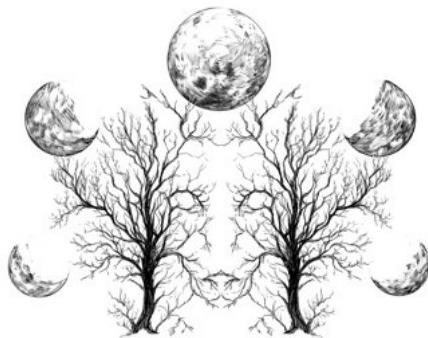
“I’m fine.” I’m not fine.

She places a hand gingerly atop mine. “Do you want to risk it?”

With a sigh that comes out more like a roar, I stand from the chair and dart out of the room. I should be in there with the girl, not fleeing like a coward. Still, Tess is right. I know all too well what happens when I ignore the monster, and since I keep claiming to be concerned for Abby’s safety, then I need to leave her—for now.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ABBY



*A*n endless barrage of nightmares plague me, broken only by brief moments of pain. Each time I wake, my head feels as if it will split in two. Part of me hopes it will because there must be some relief that comes from that. When I'm awake, I cannot move. There's no telling how long I've been in this bed coated in a thick layer of sweat, but I can almost be certain that it was Quinn who brought me here. If I wasn't feeling so horrible, I might be enraged at the possibility of him carrying me.

There are voices too. Ghostly and distant, yet the blurred figures that move around me are close enough to touch. Or they would be, if I had the strength to lift an arm and reach for them. I can't understand their words over the ringing of my ears, but every so often I catch a fleeting word. 'Fever.' 'Change.' 'Die.'

Am I dying? Or is this death? Immense pain and visions of the worst moments of my existence? It's said that each and every star is a soul that's passed on. But where does Lunalissa send those who forsake her? Her wolf should have killed me. This is my punishment.



When my eyes open again, the blur in them is all but gone. As is the headache, though the light streaming in through my window stings my eyes. It's a welcome relief compared to agony's relentless grip.

Quinn is in the chair beside me, eyes closed and arms folded across his chest. It makes perfect sense that his would be the first face I see. I groan, not caring if it wakes him.

His eyes fly open at the sound, and he leans forward in his chair. "It's about time," he grumbles.

"Now you're cross with me over a fever?" I'm taken aback by how hoarse my voice sounds. I cough to clear it, though the action does little.

His jaw tightens. "I told you I don't want to return you dead." Before I can respond, he reaches for a glass of water and tilts it to my lips. I want to refuse it just to spite him, but the coolness of it soothes the dry rawness of my throat and coats my lips in welcome moisture.

"Why are you here?" I ask, waving the cup away, surprised that I have the energy to do so.

"You're my guest. It's my duty to stay with you."

I laugh, but it doesn't sound right. "Your guest? And since when do you uphold your royal duties?"

I've woken in a foul mood, and his presence here is far from helping.

"I'm in support of this one." He leans back casually in his chair, and for the briefest of moments, I wonder how long he's been there. The stiff wood and minimal cushioning can't have been comfortable. But then I remember that I don't care. It was his choice to stay, so if his back hurts then it's his own damn fault.

"Well, you can go. We both know you don't want to be here. I'm fine, so consider your obligations met, *Your Highness*."

He's quiet a moment, and I think he might actually leave until he opens his mouth to speak. "My mother died of a fever."

That stops me. "I thought it was the monster."

He gazes towards the window, as if staring worlds away as his throat works. There's a pain there he doesn't want me to see. "Not her, no. I was nine. It was my first time witnessing death."

"Were you with her?"

His eyes meet mine, and I can almost swear there's a slight glossiness to them, but when he blinks, it's gone. "I was supposed to be."

"I never knew my mother. She died when I was born." I don't know why I share that with him. It's not something I talk about, but my words seem to help.

"Part of me feels as if that would be better. The memories of her are painful."

"It's not better. I may have never met mine, but I miss her. I don't think knowing her would change anything."

He nods before his face hardens with purpose. "Will you allow me to fetch you some food? There is something we must discuss, and I'd prefer not to do it with you in such a state."

I must look as bad as I feel. "The last time you wanted to talk, it was code for banishing me."

"I never banished you."

"You didn't get the chance."

"You saw to that with your fainting spell, didn't you?" He pinches the bridge of his nose in an effort to rein in his temper. "Just let me get some food in you. When you're stronger, you can argue with me all you like."

"Fine," I snap back, not caring what he does. What is it about him that makes me so angry?

He returns only a few minutes later with a small bowl in his hands. It smells divine and my stomach rumbles in desperation. I hadn't noticed the hunger before, but now it has my full attention. I'm accustomed to chronic hunger, but this feels as if I haven't eaten a thing in days.

I sit up more in the bed and he places the bowl in my lap. I reach for the wooden spoon, but my hands are embarrassingly shaky. I see him eyeing them, though he has the sense to keep his mouth shut. "No, I will not allow you to feed me." I struggle to get control of myself, and manage to bring a spoonful of broth to my lips without spilling it.

He rolls his eyes. "I'll just talk then. You've been in and out of consciousness for three days."

"That long?" No wonder I'm famished. I try to think back to my faint moments of consciousness and push past the memory of pain and focus on the voices. A memory finds me and my eyes narrow. "Did you call me bony at one point?"

He frowns. "I did not, though I certainly thought it. Don't you have mirrors in Lunae?" If I had the energy to smack his arm, I would. He changes the subject before I have the chance to try. "The moon will be full tonight."

That has meaning to me, but why is he mentioning it? "Planning to take me stargazing?"

I wouldn't have believed his lips could press tighter together if I didn't see it myself. "Quite the

opposite.”

“You really suck at this talking thing. Get to the point.”

His eyes close in thought. “You know there’s a curse on this land.”

“I’ve heard mention, though I’ve seen no evidence of it.”

“You have. You just didn’t realize it.” He brushes a nervous hand through his dark hair. “The people of this kingdom change during the days the moon is at its fullest.”

“They change?”

“The wolf that attacked you when you fled. That was Morgan. He’s new to this land, and the first few changes are sporadic. He shifted early. Everyone else—save for you and I—will shift tonight. Some have already.”

“I think this is a fever dream. People don’t turn into wolves.”

“Everything I’ve told you is true. I wanted you away from Rosewood and out of the forest before the full moon, but we’re out of time. You will have to stay here until it’s safe for you to leave.”

“If the land is cursed, how do you know we won’t change?”

“For a while, I thought you might. That fever… But I was wrong. You weren’t bitten, so you won’t change.”

“And you?”

“My curse is different. Part of it is to witness my people change over and over and know that I can do nothing to save them.”

Realization hits me like a tree branch to the face. “But you were bitten! Your shoulder, you were ___”

He cuts me off. “Look.” He pulls his shirt down to reveal a series of fully healed small scars that look years old.

“How is that possible?”

“My curse is different,” he says again. “Eat.”

I bring the spoon to my lips again and take another sip. My strength must be returning because it’s easier this time. The warmth it fills my stomach with is comforting. “So when you said livestock would draw in the wildlife, what you meant was…”

“Yes. Livestock was the first to go.”

“And that’s why the animals flee the forest under the first full moon.” I shake my head in disbelief. “We believed it to be a blessing from the goddess.”

He scoffs. “It is no blessing.”

“It saved my people from starving.”

His face falls at that, and his tone turns soft. “Then at least some good came of it.” Without warning, his neck arches sharply to the side and his entire body tenses in what can only be pain. It lasts only a few seconds, and then he relaxes with a long exhaled breath.

“I’ve seen you do that before. Morgan did it too.” Pieces of a puzzle I didn’t know I was assembling start coming together. I’d been told Morgan was grappling with a sickness that wasn’t shared through the air. But what about a bite?

He seems to know where my thoughts are. “My curse is different,” he says yet again, as if the more he says it, the more I will understand.

“You keep saying that. Maybe try elaborating?” I’m growing irritated with his non-answers.

He laughs softly to himself and just from that, I know I’m not getting anything more out of him. “You should get some rest. Your fever has broken, but the infection in your wound hasn’t entirely settled. Please stay in the castle tonight.”

“Now I’m not even allowed on the grounds?” The word ‘prisoner’ plays over and over in my mind. When I left Lunae, I swore I’d never be a prisoner again.

“You are. Just not during the full moon. Do I need to lock you in here?”

I resort to anger to mask the fear those words instil in me. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me.”

“I don’t plan on leaving this room anytime soon.” I don’t admit it’s because I don’t think I have the strength to walk.

“I need to hear you say it. Promise me you will not leave this castle. Swear it on your huntsman.”

The anger I was using as a mask turns genuine and my lips purse into a hard line. “Get out of my room.” I’d roll away from him if not for the steaming bowl of soup still half full in my lap.

“I misspoke. I didn’t mean—”

“Go.”

He stands, but makes no move to leave. I muster the strength to lean over and place the bowl on the small table next to the bed. He reaches to help, but I move quick enough so not to give him the satisfaction. I want him out now, and if he won’t walk out of here on his own, then I’ll throw him out myself.

The instant I put weight on my legs, they give out from under me. His arms catch mine and keep me upright. “Get your hands off me!” I jab an elbow into his stomach, but I doubt he even felt it.

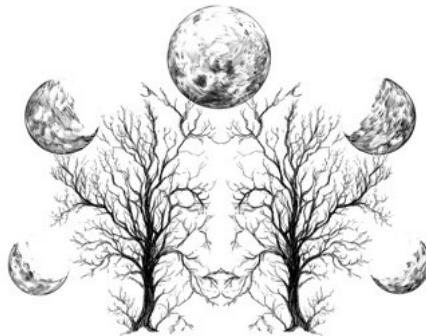
He releases me and takes a step back with his hands raised, clearly hoping I don’t move to follow him. I can just keep balanced, but if I take a step, I’ll likely fall again. It’ll take more than a few spoonfuls of soup to get me steady on my feet.

“Get out,” I say again, and I don’t need to channel Arabella’s authority for once. There’s more than enough of it behind my words.

He moves for the door, but turns back to me before crossing the threshold. “Do not leave this castle.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ABBY



I slept a while longer, and when I awoke again, the sky outside had lightened to the orange and yellow haze of sunset. I test my footing before climbing out of bed entirely, and move to take a seat by the window. I've always loved the sunset, and something about it now seems so different in this forest world. It no longer ends in a flat line, but rather jagged edges where the tips of trees—dark green and black in the low light—meld with colour.

Movement on the ground catches my eye. There are people—those yet to turn, if what Quinn said earlier is to be believed. I watch them intently, curious to see just what curse grips them under the light of a full moon. There's only about ten of them, spread out as they cross the valley towards the tree line. This would have seemed like an innocent evening stroll if it weren't for the fact that they were stripping their clothes off and leaving shirts and pants and dresses behind them in careless heaps.

My cheeks flush and the polite thing to do would be to look away, but I don't. If this 'curse' is mass psychosis, then I need to know about it. I'm not sure what would be worse. Wolves are dangerous, of course, but people can be too.

It doesn't take long for one of them to drop to their knees. With the ever-growing dimness of night and the distance between us, it's difficult to see with any great detail, but it seems as if the person is experiencing some sort of convulsions. None of the others pay her any mind as her guttural screams pierce the air. Many disappear into the trees before their cries join the symphony, but two others drop before they make it.

The cries morph into something between human and animal as flesh tears and fur breaks free. The cracking of bones reaches me even here and twists my stomach. I'm not certain I believed Quinn, but even if a small part of me did, I could never have imagined that it was anything like this.

One of the people—no, wolves—lets out a howl and the other two join in. They run to each other, snapping their jaws in a violent display. Will they harm each other, or is this just wolf behaviour?

I lean further out the window to get a better look at them. Their coats are each a different shade of brown, varying from russet to what could almost be black. None are silver like the monster that attacked me, but that doesn't mean it couldn't have been one of the wolves.

I lean a bit too far and pull back abruptly, knocking over the candle I'd placed on the windowsill. "Shit," I hiss as it falls to the ground three stories below. I can see that it's gone out, so at least I don't have to worry about setting the castle on fire, but scan the ground below, anyway. I don't want to spend hours looking for it whenever Quinn says it's safe to go outside.

My search for the candle is short-lived when a barking growl draws my attention back to the

wolves. The three of them are staring up at me, teeth bared and nocturnal eyes glistening in the faded evening light. They move closer in tandem, their attention never once breaking from me, and I've never been so thankful to be a prisoner behind walls of wood and stone. There's no way they can reach me here.

The russet wolf jumps for the trellis of snaking ivy and falls after successfully climbing a few steps. I back away from the window because if it can make it that far, who's to say it won't make it inside? There are no shutters on my window, and even if there were, there's no guarantee I'll be safe.

I'm the livestock now.

I dart out of the room and down the corridor, still unsteady on my feet but maintaining enough balance not to stumble. It's darker than usual as only some of the hall torches are lit, likely because there's no castle staff here to maintain them. I don't know where I'm going, but anywhere is better than here. I just want a room with no windows. A safe interior room with a locking door to hide behind until this nightmare ends. Some people shifted before they made it to the forest, so what if some of them are still inside the castle? If even one animal is prowling these halls...

And what of Quinn? He'd been so sure he wouldn't turn, but he too was bitten. His fast healing means nothing. If anything, that should be further proof that something is wrong with him. He can take 'my curse is different' and shove it up his—

There's a noise down the corridor ahead of me, just beyond the corner. My instincts scream at me to turn around and run the other way. There's nowhere to go. Back to my chambers isn't an option and there's nowhere to hide between there and here.

My heart beats erratically in my chest and I feel as if adrenaline is the only thing keeping me moving now. There's a closed door to my right, and I have no idea where it leads, but I force it open anyway and shut myself inside. I run to the far wall and curl up in the corner, hugging my legs tight against my chest. There's a window in here, but I can't worry about that now because there's something just outside the door. Two shadowy lines interrupt the torchlight outside and the door clicks open.

A scream rips through me.

"Abby?!"

"Jade?" I gasp and jump to my feet, throwing myself at the figure and wrapping my arms tightly around him. When he doesn't hug me back, the pain of that loss hits me all over again. I let the man go and drop to the ground, no longer bothering to keep my emotions in check. The tears flow freely now, leaving salty trails down my cheeks.

"Abby." Quinn's voice is soft. He crouches down in front of me and places warm hands against my back. The warmth of him pulls me in, and before I know it, I'm fully sobbing against his chest. He lets me, staying silent and unmoving. When I regain enough self-control to pull away and bring my eyes to his, there's a question looming in them.

"The wolves," I sniff and wipe a stray tear from my eye. "They tried to get in my window."

His body stiffens a fraction, but his eyes remain soft. "They can't get inside."

"How do you know that? They're hunting me. They're going to rip me apart like—" I cut off with another sob, either unable or unwilling to say his name.

"Do you trust me?"

"No."

He chuckles. How is he laughing right now? "Fair enough, but I can take you somewhere nothing will reach you. Even if they swarm the castle—which they won't—you'll be safe."

I study his face for a long moment and see nothing but honesty. "Okay."

He offers me a hand to help me up, but I brush it away and clamber to my feet on my own. I'm trembling and the tears are cold on my cheeks, but at least they've stopped falling. I follow close behind him, anxiety spiking at every sound and shadow. His demeanour is perfectly calm and self-assured, but it does little to ease the quaking within me. He walks these darkened halls as if it were nothing—as if there weren't sixty wolves outside fully prepared to tear us to pieces.

"Here we are," he says, coming to a stop in the middle of a corridor I've never ventured. Or, at least, I don't think I have. Everything looks the same here, and I have an abysmal sense of direction.

"A bookcase?" Is this his idea of a joke? There's not even a room here, never mind a wolf-proof sanctuary.

He glances at me before pressing his weight up against the side of the bookcase. It groans before something clicks and the entire shelf shifts sideways to reveal a door. This one opens with little effort. It's too dark to see much of the cluttered space, but I can just make out what looks like an enormous bed, writing desk, walls lined with bookshelves, and a cozy corner fireplace.

Quinn gestures for me to go in first, but leaves the door open wide behind us. For a moment, I don't think he's coming in, but after a steady breath he joins me and begins stacking a few dry pieces of wood in the fireplace. He makes quick work of it and has no trouble sparking the fire with the starter. It roars to life, devouring the dry wood and sending flickers of light and shadow across the room. In the light, he looks tired.

"Did I wake you?" I ask, letting a cool shudder run through me as I move beside the fire and give myself over to the warmth of it.

"I was up."

"Because you didn't trust me not to run?"

His eyes fall closed. "Can we please not do this tonight? If you want to fight, then I think I should just go." He moves to stand, and before I can stop myself, I reach out a hand and grab hold of his wrist.

"Wait, don't."

He shifts at the touch, so I release his arm. I think he's going to walk out, but instead he shuts the door. "You okay if I close this? You got me paranoid when you said they were going for your window."

"I might have exaggerated a bit. They were certainly trying, but they didn't get past the trellis. What is this place?" I gaze around and take in the cluttered space. It looks as if someone spent quite a lot of time here, but not for a long while. A thin layer of dust coats every exposed surface, and there's a musty scent in the air. Still, the room isn't altogether uncomfortable—and there's not a single window, so it does wonders for my nerves. I notice on the other side of the room something I'd missed in the dark. There's a board propped up against the far wall, with various knives in all different shapes and sizes stuck into the wood. Someone had no doubt busied themself throwing them at the target, but they've long since been forgotten.

More at ease now, Quinn moves further inside the room, but keeps at least an arm's length away. I guess touching him was crossing a line. "I had it made shortly after the curse began. I wanted a place to just... be. No one has been in here for almost four years, so you'll have to forgive the dust." He drags a finger along a shelf full of books.

"It's nice," I say, but it comes off far from convincing. "Have you read all of these books?"

He gazes around at the various shelves. "I have, at least once. And most of the ones in the library."

I'd nearly forgotten about the library. "Is the library off-limits too?"

The space between his eyes creases. “Why would it be?”

“No reason.” I shift awkwardly at the sudden change in the air. “You must think I’m ridiculous.”

“You’re handling this better than I did at the start.”

“Somehow, I doubt that.”

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. Was it always so wavy? “I locked myself in this room and refused to eat. Ruben begged me to open the door. When I stopped responding to him at the start of the third week, he and my brother broke it down.”

“And they convinced you to eat?”

He shudders. “Something like that. The room has since been reinforced. You have nothing to fear here.”

I take a seat on the bed, not bothering to shake the dust off the sheets. I’m sure people have slept in worse conditions. There’s something in Quinn’s tired eyes that’s strikingly familiar. It’s a look I know all too well because I’ve worn it more times than I can count. “I have nightmares too.” It’s just a guess, but the slight cooling of his gaze confirms my suspicions.

“Is it that obvious?”

“It’s not *not* obvious.”

“Got any tips?” I can tell it’s a rhetorical question, but there is one thing I can recommend.

“It helps if you’re not alone. Teagan—my lady’s maid—slept in my room most nights. It didn’t always work, but it made the nights bearable.” That’s the first time I’ve said her name since that awful day in the woods. My eyes sting at the thought of her, but they behave themselves. I’ve done enough crying for one night.

“She was with you, wasn’t she?” All I can do is nod. “I’m sorry. You were lucky to have such a good friend.”

He moves for the door again, and the thought of him leaving has me riding a tidal wave of emotion. After everything that’s happened tonight, I can’t stand the thought of being alone again. I can’t bear to think what horrible dreams will plague me tonight when sleep finally finds me. “Do you need me to say it?” He stops, but doesn’t turn to me. “Stay with me.”

He meets my gaze, and his eyes darken. “I shouldn’t.”

“We’re both fucked up. We may as well be fucked up together.”

His lips twitch into an almost-smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “I’ve never heard a lady swear so much.”

“Being under the impression that I’m anything remotely resembling a lady is your first mistake.” I pick up one of the dusty pillows and toss it at him. He catches it in front of him with ease and holds it against his chest, his eyes never leaving mine.

“I thought you didn’t trust me.”

I point to the board of knives and flash him a smile. “Try anything and I won’t hesitate to stab you.”

He laughs at that, and I think it’s the first genuine laugh I’ve heard from him. “I actually believe you would try.” He moves to the armchair by the fire and props the pillow against the wall, leaning his head against it to hold it in place. It looks far from comfortable, but if he’s anywhere close to as tired as he looks, then I’m fully confident that sleep will find him eventually.

I crawl under the blankets and make myself as comfortable as possible. I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t a bit awkward having him in here with me. We’re hardly better than strangers—even with all the bickering since my arrival—but tonight we share a bond. Alone in this castle, both plagued by sleepless nights. I wonder what he dreams about. I don’t want to think about how many nights he’s

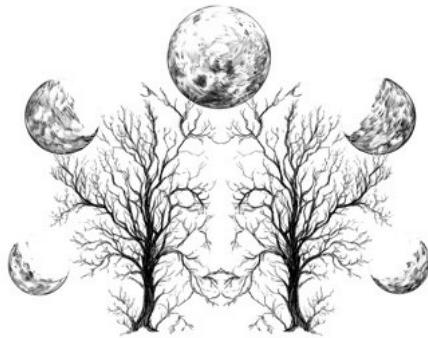
spent alone here, forced to watch his people transform into beasts, to hear their cries of agony turn into howls.

‘My curse is different.’ I think about his words and the meaning behind them. Having to witness this again and again, month after month, would weigh on a person. I called him an absent prince, and although that might be true, he wouldn’t be tormented so if he didn’t care about his people. I’m willing to admit that I may have misjudged him to some degree, but the fact remains that he’s hiding something...

And I’m going to do whatever it takes to find out what that is.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

QUINN



A voice reaches me, muffled and distant. I ignore it, but each time it calls my name, it draws me closer until I can no longer keep my eyes shut tight. They spring open, and a familiar face fills my vision. My breath catches and my heart nearly stops. “Evan? How are you here? I thought you were dead.”

My brother’s expression shifts from mildly annoyed to one of full confusion. “Are you mad? Of course I’m not dead. Get your ass out of bed. Father wants us in the throne room.”

Father? But... That can’t be right. Something about this place is wrong. It’s Rosewood castle, of that I’m certain, but the dust and shadow have turned into a bright haze. Where the light is coming from, I have no idea.

“Hurry up,” Evan says, and I leap to my feet. If I was asleep, I should need to get dressed, yet I’m already fully clothed. “Slept alone last night, did you? I was half expecting to find three different women in your bed.”

I punch him in the arm, and the impact feels solid, feels real. He knows full well that I’ve never bedded three at one time... but two? I believe that did happen once. It probably says something about me I can’t remember, though I don’t remember much of anything right now. Why did I think Evan was dead?

We enter the throne room to find my father seated on his throne with my mother’s empty beside him. He’d said no other woman would sit there so long as he was alive. “What’s going on?” I ask.

Evan answers with a long, shushing sound. “We have visitors.”

“Visitors?” Rosewood rarely has visitors. Especially before... Before what? Why can’t I remember?

“Quinn!”

I turn on my heel to the source of the joyous squeal, and my younger sister Kaylee skips towards me. Before I can even spread my arms, she wraps hers tight around my waist. She’s wearing her favourite blue and white gown, and something about it feels wrong. She must have loaned that dress to someone because when I look at her now, it’s not her face that I feel I should be seeing.

“Both of you, knock it off,” Evan warns. He’s the oldest and has always been the disciplinarian when our father couldn’t.

Before either of us can tease him, the main castle doors swing open and a hooded figure enters, each step clicking against the stone flooring. A servant scurries to them and the stranger slips off the cloak, revealing a dark purple and silver gown underneath which makes her blood-red hair stand out.

“A sorceress!” Kaylee whispers excitedly.

"How do you know she's mageborn?" Evan asks her. He too must be curious about this woman if he's risking whispering about her.

"Because I have eyes. If she's not a sorceress, then I'm not a princess." She's *not* a princess. Not really, anyway. Not by blood, but public opinion goes far.

Something about this sorceress seems so familiar to me, but I can't place it. Still, a feeling of unease fills my belly, sloshing side to side as if I'd consumed far too much drink. While the stranger excites my siblings, I find myself wanting nothing to do with her. As if she could read my thoughts, she turns to me and violet eyes lock onto mine.

My pulse quickens, sending blood coursing through me. I know this woman. I may not remember how or why, but I know she's someone to be feared. "Stop this," I say loud enough for my father to hear. His age-tired eyes shift to me, but he says nothing. A high-pitched laugh fills my ears as the woman moves closer. This has all happened before, I'm sure of it, but this isn't how it happened. "You're not welcome here," I tell her.

Her grin grows wider, showing off her perfect teeth. "Not welcome? That's not what you told me." She snaps her fingers and the scene changes. I'm back in my room, and the poison woman is with me.

"No. No, this is wrong."

She presses a long, slender finger against my lips before dragging a pointed nail down them to my chin. I have no doubt that it would be sharp enough to slice through flesh if she so desired. "Don't fight it, prince. You and I both know that's not how this goes."

I swallow back my fear. "This has happened before."

"It has. This is but a memory. You cannot change the end result."

For a split second, my vision fills with red. Blood coats the floor, the walls, the bed. In the time it takes to blink, the blood is gone. "Get out of my chambers."

"You cannot change the end result," she says again, this time in a sing-song voice. She leans in closer, as if to kiss me, but I push her away and move for the door. "They're already dead," her voice follows after me as I bolt from the room.

The corridors are a maze, none of them leading where I want them to. I turn a corner that should take me to the tower, but I find the throne room ahead of me. The dark floors reflect torchlight in a way they never have before, and when I move closer, I see that it's because they're wet. I bend down to touch it, running two fingers through the thick and sticky liquid. *Through the blood.*

"Father!" I call, jumping to my feet and running towards the thrones. Blood splashes around me with each step, and the sound it makes has me tasting bile. There's no sign of him, save for strips of shredded fabric and a discarded crown sitting in a pool of blood.

I run from the room, meaning to leave the castle altogether, but instead find myself just outside what I once called my safe haven. I know what I'll find inside, but I can't stop my feet from taking deliberate steps down the hall and into the room.

"Evan." His name gets caught in my throat, mingled with a building sob. My brother is lying on the ground, stomach torn open with a great silver wolf atop him. It raises its head to look at me, mouth stained crimson and bits of flesh stuck between its barred teeth. It growls at me, but there's nothing to fear, for the eyes that stare back at me are a mirror image of my own. The metallic taste of blood fills my mouth as the wolf resumes its meal.

I shut my eyes against it, but the crunching of bone and sloshing of blood is loud in my ears.

"Quinn." I hear my name called from somewhere too distant to save me from this. "Quinn," it calls again, whisper soft, but louder still.

“No,” I plead. I can’t take much more of this. I don’t want to see whatever else my mind wishes to torment me with—no matter how much I may deserve it.

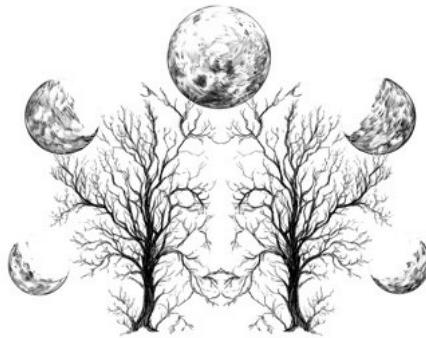
“Quinn.”

My eyes snap open, and dimness replaces light. For a moment, the blood follows me. Pooled on the floor and sprayed across the walls, but when I blink, it’s gone. There’s a girl in the bed now, but not the sorceress. It’s impossible to separate past from present, fiction from reality, memory from wish. I recognize this girl, but her name eludes me. All I know for certain is how I feel about seeing her there. The emptiness inside me is cold, but she is warmth.

I’ll do anything to fill the void within me, even for just a moment. I need to feel the warmth. Before I can consider my actions, I lunge for her, desperately reaching for whatever comfort she’ll allow me.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ABBY



Quinn's lips are on mine, his fingers weaving through my hair and holding me against him. He tugs at it gently, tilting my head back for a better angle, and then slips his tongue between my teeth. I let him, because for the first time in days, I feel something other than rage, emptiness, and fear.

Time no longer exists, so there's no telling how long we stay like that, but all too soon, his senses return and I feel him pulling away. "No," I say, the word sounding muffled against his lips in my desperation to keep them pressed against mine.

I tug at his shirt, the sudden need to feel his skin against me impossible to ignore. We break apart only briefly—just long enough for me to pull the shirt from him and discard it. I don't know where it landed, and I don't care. I press my lips against his again, and he mirrors my force. The skin of his arms and chest feel scarred beneath my hands. I trace the lines of them with my fingertips in silent question. He shudders against the touch, and his only answer is to kiss me fiercer. He smells of wood smoke with only a hint of the floral sweetness that dominates the Rosewood air, and he tastes of something even sweeter.

A hand slips under my nightgown, and I sit up on my knees so he can pull it off me. When his fingers brush against my scars, he freezes and abruptly pulls away. "Turn around."

"It's nothing," I say and lean in to kiss him again.

He lifts me as if I weigh nothing and turns me so that my back is facing him. He lifts my gown to my shoulders and then moves a hand down the length of my back. "Who did this to you?" The aroused hoarseness of his voice has changed to something colder, and I shiver despite the warmth of the room and the heat coursing through me.

"Does it matter?"

He whips me around again, firm but gentle enough not to hurt me. There's conflict in his eyes, a silent battle warring within him. I wonder what emotions are swirling just beneath the surface. Certainly lust, and probably anger given his temper, but there's more to it than that. Something that runs deeper. His mouth opens and closes a few times, as if he's repeatedly stopping himself from speaking. Luckily, I have a solution for that.

"Kiss me."

"Abby," he sighs, running a hand through his hair. The action immediately makes me wish it was my fingers running through it.

"Kiss me," I say again, more forcefully this time. Before he can object, I pull off my nightgown and show him everything I am.

His eyes fight to stay on mine, but it's a losing battle, and it takes only seconds for them to slide

downwards. His breath catches and the sound sets my insides ablaze. I don't have to ask this time because his lips return to mine and his hands move to cup my breasts, a gentle massaging broken occasionally by a teasing pinch that has me gasping for air.

This isn't enough. It's not even close.

I reach for his pants, my fingers fumbling at the button, keeping him trapped inside. He pulls away from me again and I can't contain the frustrated groan.

A soft chuckle escapes him before the seriousness returns. "Are you sure?" He studies my face for any sign of hesitation.

"Yes," I breathe. "Unless you don't want to."

His smile returns and I wonder if this is the first time I've truly seen it. "Do I look like I don't want to?"

Before I can answer that, he has me on my back. It takes him only seconds to escape from his pants and claim the space between my legs. His lips find mine just as another part of him finds another part of me. He thrusts inwards and we gasp in unison. His rhythm is slow, precise.

"Are you okay?" He breathes, his words coming out like a low growl.

I pant a response. "Is this... the best... you can do?"

I feel him laugh as much as I hear it, and in answer, his pace and ferocity intensify. He slams into me, and I have to dig my nails into his back just to hold on as a wave of pleasure takes me.

"Better?"

"You could... stand to learn... a thing... or two."

He takes me up on my challenge and rolls us so that I'm on top so expertly that we don't lose any momentum. "Then show me." He grits his teeth and arches his neck as I ride him. There's no denying that I'm not exactly in peak condition at the moment, but he doesn't seem to notice or care. I need this, and he seems to be enjoying it as much as I am.

He lifts his hands to my hips, but I snatch them in mine and pin them down above his head. "Who said you could touch me?"

I squeeze his wrists with the building of my pleasure, and his hands ball into fists with the building of his. I'm close, but I can tell he's closer and I'm not about to let him finish first. I bring my lips to his neck and suck at the skin until I have just enough between my teeth. I bite down hard and he gasps in pained rapture. The moment he takes to recover is enough for me to catch up to him, and when we're riding the same wave, I go all in.

He sucks in a sharp breath at the same moment I do and we groan into each other. Every cell of my body sings with euphoria as he twitches inside me, filling me in more ways than one.

I collapse beside him, my shaking arms no longer possessing the strength to keep me upright, as if whatever power had been driving me is gone. We stay like that for a long time, catching our breath and revelling in the aftermath of what we've just done. I won't give him the satisfaction of hearing me say it, but *fuck, that was good*.

"I can't believe you bit me." He touches a hand to his neck and then pulls it away to check for blood.

I laugh. "The moment called for it."

"You were right before. You're the furthest thing from a lady." He rolls to face me, his lips twitched up into a shy smile that falters after only a moment. "I'm sorry I threw myself at you."

"Does it look like I'm complaining?" When his mood doesn't lighten, I roll toward him and put a hand on his arm. This time, he doesn't shy away from the touch. "Who's Evan? You were calling out for him in your sleep."

His eyes fall closed, and for a time I think he won't answer. "He was my brother."

"And Kaylee was your sister? You said her name too, but it was mostly Evan."

He nods. "I was dreaming about their deaths. I dream about them almost every night."

"Do you want to know what I dream about?" Before he can answer, I take his hand in mine and lift it over me so that his fingertips brush against the scars on my back.

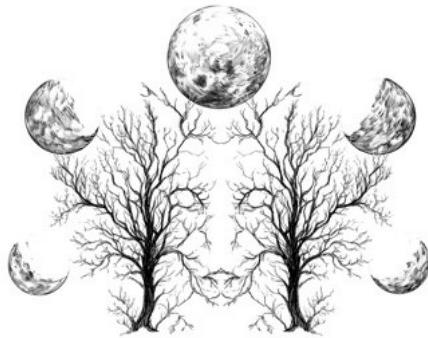
"Tell me," he says, and I know he's not asking about the dreams.

I don't owe him an answer, but for whatever reason, I don't mind if he knows. So I tell him everything. The words flow out of me like a river after a rain, and once they get started, there's no hope of stopping them. I tell him about the Marked and what sparing them cost me. I tell him about Jade and buying his freedom. I tell him about the Marching and food rations and rumours of uprising. The only thing I keep to myself is the mention of Marein and my meeting with the Marked in the tunnels beneath Lunae. Politics has no place in the bedchamber, and I don't yet trust him enough for that.

He waits in attentive silence until he's certain I've finished. "That's why you've been so adamant about not going home. So insistent on fighting with me at the mere mention of it." When I say nothing, he lets out what might be the longest sigh I've ever heard. "Only a monster would send you back to that."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ABBY



When my eyes open to the soft flicker of fading firelight, I know the second half of the night had been dreamless—for both me and the man still sleeping next to me. His chest rises and falls with even breaths and there's not an ounce of tenseness on his face. He seems so different like this. So small, almost childlike. When was the last time he slept so peacefully? The fear that filled him last night was on such a level that I wouldn't have blamed him if he told me he feared simply closing his eyes.

Careful not to disturb him, I slip the blanket from my body and tiptoe across the room. My stomach clenches in a demand for food and something will have to be done about that before the incessant growling wakes him. There will be things to say after what happened last night, and I'd like to prolong that as long as possible. It will be easy enough to find my way to the kitchen, but the thought of wolves roaming the halls is still fresh in my mind.

As silently as I can, I wiggle a knife free from the board on the wall, selecting the biggest, longest one I can find. Quinn said he hasn't been in this room for years, but despite that, this knife appears to have kept its edge.

Good.

If anyone gets between me and the filling of my belly, they're going to have a bad day.

The bookshelf door unlocks with a loud click and what must be rusted wheels screech in protest as it slides open. I cringe at the sound and the fact that Quinn didn't seem to have this much trouble with it last night. Only a fool would deny that he's stronger than me, but I don't need the reminder of it. Quinn groans softly at the sound and rolls over in the bed, but seconds later resumes his steady breathing.

I only take two wrong turns on the way to the kitchen, but at least there are no wolves in sight. That is, until a soft sound in the hall ahead of me has my palm sweating so much that I might drop the knife before I get the chance to use it. I move forward as quietly as I can, knife pointed ahead of me as far as my arms will reach.

I hear the sound again, closer this time, and look down to find a tiny mouse scurrying along the side of the wall. Laughing at my ridiculousness, I lower the weapon. "Aren't you just the little survivor?" A kingdom of wolves with no prey to speak of, and yet this little mouse is perfectly at home here.

I move to the far end of the kitchen and set my knife down on the table while I search through various stores and cabinets. I find some bread and break off a few pieces. I look down at the plain bread on the plate and know there has to be something I can spread on it or dip it into. Even just some

honey...

I open a pantry and find it filled with jars upon jars. I select the closest one and turn the lid until it opens with a pop that seems too loud in the empty castle. It's eerie without the staff running around every which way, cleaning and cooking and maintaining. I've lived in a palace my entire life and my lack of understanding of what the staff does is shameful. I wouldn't begin to know how to run a house, never mind a place like this. Tess certainly has her work cut out for her, and I make a mental note to tell her that everything she's done for me is appreciated. I'll even see if she'll let me help in some way. I'm not a princess here, so there's no reason I shouldn't do my part.

I examine the jar in my hand. I'm sure this is a jam of some kind, but I've never had the opportunity to try it. Such things weren't common in Lunae, and if we ever did have such a treasure, I wouldn't put it past my stepmother to hoard it for herself. I bring the jar of shiny orange mush to my nose and inhale deeply. The fragrance is intoxicating and unlike anything I've smelled before. Anything that smells as wonderful as this must taste divine.

"I hope you weren't planning to use that on me." The voice comes from somewhere behind me, breaking the steady silence and bringing a scream to my lips. The jar slips from my fingers and explodes in a splattering of glass and preserved fruit when it smashes against the stone floor. Quinn looks just as startled by my reaction when I turn to him, but it quickly fades to amusement.

"You bastard," I almost growl as I fight to regain control of my racing heart. "Don't sneak up on me like that!"

The cocky smile doesn't leave his face as he strides towards me, stretching his arms above his head as if he's just woken from the best sleep he's had in years. He takes a rag off the table and bends down, completely unbothered by the mess. One by one, he gathers shards of glass that are near-invisible against the ashen floor. "I think out of the two of us, you're the one doing the sneaking. I didn't even hear you leave."

"That was the point," I grumble, bending to his level. There's no way I'm going to let him clean this up for me—even when it's entirely his fault.

His nose wrinkles at the cloud of fragrance that envelops us. "Did you have to drop this one? It'll take months to get the smell out."

Anger bubbles up inside me, mingling with residual panic and immense guilt. The people of Lunae are starving and not only did I just waste perfectly good food, but the prince here is upset that I dropped the *wrong* food. "Spoken like a prince who has never been hungry a day in his life."

His jaw tightens at my words, but whether that's regret for his or a quickness to anger, I don't know. Before he can say anything else, I move to scoop up the whatever-it-is in my hands. Perhaps some of it can be saved.

His eyes widen. "Wait, there might still be—"

"Fuck!"

"—glass."

I pull my hand away as a river of red runs down my wrist from the side of my palm and falls in thick droplets that mingle with the jam. Any hope of eating it now is definitely gone. I let out a groan of frustration and pain. My hand stings more than it should, as if whatever fruit this came from burns like the fire of the sun.

I whip my head left and right in a frantic search for something—anything—to stop the burning. What kind of cursed fruit is this? Something this painful to the touch should not smell so tempting! Does it do this to the mouth, too?

"Let me," he says. Before I can object, he lifts me off my feet and sets me down on the table next

to a large bowl. He fills it with water from a pitcher and then dunks my hand into it, shaking it gently until most of the jam has sopped off and the water turns to a murky pink. “Hold still.”

He lifts my hand from the water. A shard of glass juts out from the side of my palm, no bigger than the nail of my smallest finger. I brace myself for pain when he hovers an impossibly still hand over mine, but when he pinches the glass between his thumb and middle finger and tugs, I don’t feel a thing. The glass pops out and scarlet flows freely from the hole it left in my skin.

He tears a strip of fabric from the bottom of his loose-fitting shirt, fibres splitting with ease under the force of his fingers and revealing the bottom of his chiseled abdomen. I cough to mask any sign that seeing any part of his body again rekindles the fires of the night before, but the return of his cocky smile tells me he noticed. *Smug bastard.*

He ties the fabric around my hand and lingers there, rubbing the broken skin with a gentle thumb. “We’ll have to find you something cleaner, but that’ll do for now.” He’s far too close to me, and the smell of him is nearly as intoxicating as the jam. I wonder if he would take me here and now if I asked him to. I clamp my mouth shut, so it doesn’t say the words fighting to spill out. *Fuck me right here on this table.*

When he finally releases me, only then do I realize that I’d stopped breathing. I search my brain for words—any words—to interrupt the moment between us. What happened last night was nothing more than sex, so whatever it is I’m feeling now is just lingering arousal. “What fruit was that?” Why do I sound so breathless?

“Citrin. You’re lucky it was just the jam. The juice itself would have brought you to your knees.”

Getting on my knees doesn’t sound all that bad right now. I mentally slap myself. These thoughts are getting out of hand. The sex was good, but *come on.* I’m better than this.

“I’ve never heard of citrin before. For something to burn like that, it must have come from Dragoria itself.”

His boisterous laugh echoes off the walls. “Dragoria? Now that’s a word I haven’t heard since childhood. Has Tess been filling your head with stories?”

“I’m not illiterate,” I say, hoping he can hear the annoyance in my tone. If I’m fighting with him, I can’t be fucking him. What happened last night can’t happen again, no matter how much my body craves it.

He ignores my tone—how very gentlemanly of him. “Citrins come from the Jade Coast, where the weather is warmer. Wolves travel far and sometimes they don’t make it back before they shift. When that happens, it’s not unusual to have someone return with rare delicacies.”

I cling desperately to my anger, but guilt overpowers it. I gaze down at the mess around us and think about how no one in Lunae would even dream that such a fruit existed, never mind get the chance to sample one. Worse still, those from Marein would have grown up on foods like this. Not only are they missing out, but this is a piece of their identities that was stripped away. Whether that was by wave or war, I still can’t be sure.

He must have noticed my face fall because the brushing of his fingers against mine bring my attention back to him. “I can’t imagine living a life of constant hunger. I know that me telling you it’s okay doesn’t make it so, but no one is going to go hungry because of this. You’ve hurt no one. Except yourself,” he adds with a smirk.

I pull away from him, once again breaking our connection. *Fighting or fucking,* I remind myself. “What did you mean when you came in and scared me half to death?” His eyes crinkle in confusion, so I repeat his words to the best of my memory, putting on a voice with an air of arrogance for good measure. “I hope you’re not planning to use that on me.”

His lips twitch up in a knowing smile, and I hate how much I love it. He picks up the knife on the table and examines it, twirling the blade in his hands. “This is a fine knife, but it’s no good for you. If you were planning to stab me, you should have gone with something smaller.”

“You mean something more suited to my delicate female hands?” I don’t even need to invent the anger that boils inside me now, and stabbing him doesn’t sound like all that bad an idea.

He laughs at me, and that only makes it worse. “Gender has nothing to do with it. Smaller knives are easier to wield. Even I would use something more compact, and knives are my preferred weapon. I can use a sword, a spear, even a bow—but none are as much fun as a good knife.” He winks.

The sex must have been too good last night. Either that, or he knows I’m rearing for a fight and he’s not biting just to enrage me more. “It’s no surprise you would associate weaponry with fun.”

The words are meant to sting, but if they do, he doesn’t show it. “Have you ever used one? Aside from your pitiful attempt to save me from Morgan, of course.”

“I was *not* trying to save you.”

“Whatever you say, Stabby.” He winks at me again, and that’s as much as I can take.

“Suddenly, I’m not hungry,” I mutter, sliding off the table.

He snatches my wrist so I can’t get far. “Yes, you are.”

“Get your hands off me!” I hit and shove at his chest with my uninjured hand, and hate how firm and warm it is. *Fighting or fucking. Fighting or fucking. Fighting or fucking.*

“You really want to do this?” He flashes me a wicked smile before scooping me up and slinging me over his shoulder.

“What are you doing?!” I screech, pounding at his back with my fists, legs flailing in the air. *Please take me to the bedroom. Put me down!*”

“It’s a good thing I took that knife from you. With all that squirming, you’d probably cut yourself again.”

“Give it to me and we’ll see who gets cut.”

He chuckles to himself and pats a hand on my backside. “Not a chance.”

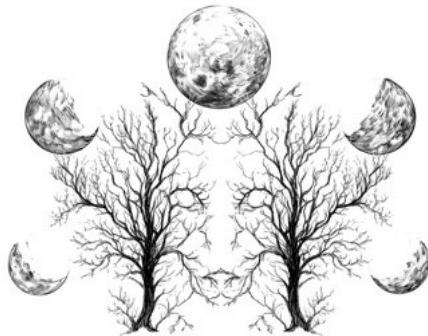
“Where are you taking me?” *Bed. Table. The floor. I don’t care, I just want you inside me.*

“To teach you how to properly wield a knife.”

The last thing I see before he carries me out of the kitchen is the little survivor mouse making a beeline for what remains of the citrin jam. At least someone will get to enjoy it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

QUINN



“I have legs, you know,” she grumbles as I carry her towards the training grounds. She’s stopped fighting, and I can almost swear there’s disappointment behind her words. I could feel the desire radiating out of her in the kitchen, but this is more important than any other fun we could be having. Besides—what happened last night was a one off. It was my mistake and entirely unfair to her. *But fuck, what I would give to taste her.*

“Very nice legs,” I agree, working to mask the sudden arousal at the thought of what lingers between them. “But this is more fun.”

“You can’t treat me like this.” That’s where she’s wrong. I would have never done this had she not wanted me to—had her thoughts not been screaming at me to take her right there on that table. She’s only upset about the destination, not the action itself.

I set her down on the low stone wall that encircles one of the smaller dirt rings. I don’t know how many times I’d been flung over that same wall while sparring with Evan. Broke my arm once, too. My father was furious. Not with Evan, of course. ‘Only a fool tries to break a fall like that,’ he’d said repeatedly until well past my arm was healed. I never stuck my arms out in front of me again, though, so I can’t say he didn’t drive in the point.

I push the memory from my mind and focus on the reason we’re out here. I catch her looking around as if nervous, but she has nothing to fear from the wolves. They’ll be far enough away now, following the prey animals. Wanting to ease her fears, I pretend I haven’t noticed hers. “Before we begin, I should thank you for last night.”

“Don’t thank me for sex.”

“That’s not—” I shake my head. It’s not worth it to argue. She still wants to fight, so I’m better off just giving her what she wants. “Forget it.”

I hold up the large knife she’d taken with her to the kitchen until I’m certain I have her attention. With an abrupt spin, I whip it away from me. It lands only just off the center of the target. Annoyance blisters inside me, but I force it back down before she has the chance to see it on my face. I *should* have been able to make that shot, but it seems it’s been far too long since I’d practiced. Still, my aim was sure enough, evident by the slight widening of her eyes.

I lift my shirt to reveal a belt of knives. When I’d noticed her missing—along with the largest knife in the room—I went back to my tower to collect these. They’re my personal collection, and although I haven’t used them for months, I still maintained the blades so they keep their edge. She’s lucky the one she’d taken had an edge at all. I shudder to think of what would have happened if she actually needed to use it. Which is exactly why I brought her here.

"That's a bit excessive, isn't it?" she asks, eyeing the belt. "Don't tell me you wear those everywhere."

I don't—not anymore, but I'm not about to tell her that. "Wouldn't you like to know?" I wink at her again because I like the blush that forms on her cheeks when I do. It appears, just as it did both times in the kitchen, brought on by some mixture of arousal and anger. I shouldn't tease her like this, but I can't remember the last time I had this much fun. It may be selfish, but I'm not ready to let that go yet.

"Give me one so I can stab you."

It takes everything I have not to smile at the threat. Two can play at this game. I take a step back and spread my arms wide at my sides. "Be my guest."

She slips off the wall and immediately loses her balance on the landing. I make a mental note that we'll have to work on that, too. Knowing how to use a knife is one thing, but if she can't even stay balanced on her feet, then it won't do her much good in a proper fight.

She grabs for my hip, and as much as I'd love to let her get her hands on me, I sidestep out of reach. She goes for me again, and just as easily as before, it takes only a single step to avoid her attack. "Bastard!"

She's angry. *Good*. "If you keep this up, you'll be wishing you didn't skip breakfast. At this rate, we may not even get to training."

Eleven, twelve, thirteen times I dodge her, not letting her get any closer to me than her first attempt. "You're such a cock!"

"What was that about my cock? I couldn't hear you over all that heavy breathing."

She lets out a frustrated groan and feigns moving to the left. It's far too obvious, but at least she's trying something new. I don't want to discourage her, so I pretend not to notice and let her get just a finger on the hilt of a knife before jumping out of her reach again.

"Close enough," I say, pulling the knife she touched from its sheath and holding it out to her. "You can keep this one."

She stares down at it in her hands, the small blade only about as long as one of them. "Is this a joke?"

Does the size really bother her? "I told you. Small is better."

She jabs for my abdomen and if I hadn't been expecting it, she may have actually broken skin. "We're not talking about last night," she hisses.

Now that's a low blow and a fucking lie. I've disappointed a fair number of women in my life, but not once was the size of my cock the problem. "Careful," I warn, all traces of humour gone. "That blade is sharper than your tongue." She's been baiting me all morning, and, like a typical man, *this* is the thing that has my nostrils flaring. *Stupid*.

The smirk on her face tells me everything I need to know. She thinks she's already won. When she swings wide, I step out of reach, just as I have for the entirety of this dance of blades. Her footwork is all wrong, and she's swinging without purpose. Either she doesn't actually want to hurt me, or she's just that bad. "Hold still and we'll see which is sharper."

She thinks she has the upper hand now, even if she hasn't drawn blood. My reaction gave her what she wanted, and that hit to my pride is worse than taking an actual blow from her. I need to regain control of this lesson, and I can only see one way to do that.

I do as she says and plant my feet firmly in the soft soil. At my sudden stillness, she attempts to halt her attack, but the momentum of her unbalanced step keeps her going just as I knew it would. The blade connects with my forearm and slices through the flesh like butter. Not too deep, but apparently

deep enough to have her gasping in horror and dropping the knife.

“What are you doing?” I grumble to hide my wince. Prepared or not, pain is pain.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“Never drop your blade.” I pick up the knife and hold it out to her, hilt out. She takes it more carefully than I’d expected and looks down at the smearing of blood along one side. It’s nothing compared to what’s running down my arm, but I don’t bother to staunch it. She needs to prepare for this just as much as she needs to know how to use a weapon. “Don’t tell me you have a problem with blood.”

“I don’t,” she says, but her face pales. The words are spoken too softly, and I realize it’s not fear or disgust that grips her.

“Don’t think about it. Whatever horror is playing in your mind, don’t think about it. Allow it to feed your anger in a fight, but never let it make you hesitate. Hesitation is death.” She doesn’t answer, so I take it a step further. She needs to push past whatever trauma she’s reliving before it prevents her from defending herself. “Do you know how to kill a person?”

She snaps her eyes up to mine, a look of horror plain on her face. From the question itself, or perhaps it was how casually I’d asked it. The words may have been cruel, but they did what was intended. She’s back in the here and now.

She’s silent for a long moment, but I wait for her answer. She swallows and then says, “Pointy end in?” I roll my eyes and pull off my shirt. “What are you doing?!”

Are my scars really so repulsive that she had to shriek like that? I guess I can’t blame her. At the very least, they must remind her of her own. She can’t see hers, so I can’t expect her to ignore mine.

“I didn’t realize my body was so offensive to you.” She bites at her lip. Is that regret or something else? I move on before I can’t resist the urge to find out. I have to stay focused. “Show me how you would kill me.”

She doesn’t move, save for bringing her eyes down to the knife in her hand and then back up to my chest. “You... You want me to stab you?”

I laugh. “You won’t get the *pointy end* anywhere near me. Don’t worry.”

I’d meant only to tease her, but her scowl says she’s taken that more as an insult than a challenge. “I cut your arm.”

“I let you. Quit stalling.”

Anger flares in her, which is exactly what I want. She can’t control her emotions in general, never mind in a fight. The angrier she is, the more accurate this test will be. She lunges for me, striking the blade downward as if she were going to pierce my jugular or perhaps my heart—and that’s if she’s aiming at all, which might be giving her too much credit.

I snatch her wrist before steel meets flesh. “Don’t strike down unless you have the higher ground, and even then I wouldn’t recommend it. You’re more likely to hit the breastbone or an upper rib. An attack like that leaves you exposed, so if you miss, you’re dead.” I release her wrist. “Again.”

She adjusts the knife in her hand and goes straight for my abdomen. I block with an arm, my eyes never leaving hers. They tell me well enough what her hands are doing. It’s all too plain on her face. When her eyes move, I move. She can’t get near me if she keeps that up.

She takes another swing as a frustrated cry escapes her, but a small step sideways avoids the attack. We’re not getting anywhere with this. “Give me the knife,” I say.

“So you can use it on me?”

If she wants to be like that, so be it. I pull another knife from the belt around my hips and show her how to hold it. “Hilt down. Blade up. When you fight with swords or spears, you want to keep some

distance from your opponent. It's different with knives. You want to dodge whatever blows you have to in order to press up against your enemy. Aim here—directly under the ribcage and thrust up into the lung. You may even hit the heart, if you're lucky." I point to the spot on my chest, angling the blade with my other hand.

She mirrors the movement and presses her knife against my skin, only just soft enough to avoid drawing blood. If I were to inhale deeply or shift even a fraction...

She takes a step back. "Where else?"

At least she's willing to learn. I turn around and point to a spot on my back. "If you can get your arms around your opponent, go for this spot. It's harder to land a killing blow when attacking this way, but it can be done. I wouldn't recommend trying for the neck unless you were squaring off with someone shorter than me."

"You're not that tall."

She just can't help herself, can she? "I'm taller than you. Now pay attention. This is important."

"I'm listening, o' mighty warrior."

I snatch her hand and press her blade directly over my heart. All mocking leaves her face and a total seriousness replaces it. She doesn't blink for fear that I might actually force her to plunge the blade into me.

"A human's heart is here." I leave it there a few seconds before sliding her hand and the weapon downward so that it's just at the top of my abdomen. "A wolf's heart is lower. You'd have a better chance of hitting the heart if you stab in through the pit of the foreleg." I turn her blade to the awkward angle she would need to accomplish that if she was face to face with a wolf. "If you need to use a knife on a wolf, the face and the neck are your best options. You may not kill it, but you'll do enough damage to make it think twice."

"So why show me how to hit the heart?"

Her question goes deeper than she realizes, and so does this lesson. Killing a man is one thing—as is defending herself from a wolf, which she's already proven is something she needs to know—but if she comes face to face with the monster again, a few slices to the face won't be enough. "Because there may come a time when you can't afford to miss."

"But you just said—"

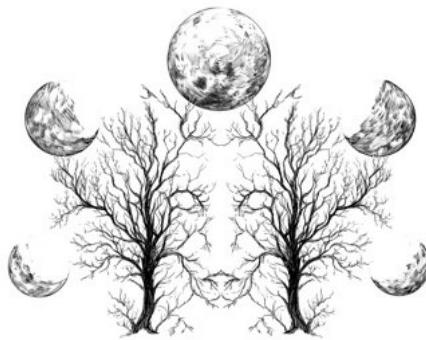
"I know what I said," I snap back, a bit too harshly. "Just don't forget." I can't handle these questions from her because I know deep down that if she asked me—*really asked me*—I would tell her the truth. It might be better for everyone if I did, but I don't want her to hate me yet. The back and forth we have, it's not real hate. I turn back and walk towards the castle so my eyes won't betray me.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know about you, but I'm hungry." It's a pitiful excuse, and I'm an ass for ripping open her trauma, only to leave her alone with it. I accomplished what I needed to. It was never about knife training—not really, though it helps to know. I just needed an excuse to show her how to kill the monster because I don't know if I have the strength of will to force her to leave me now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ABBY



Quinn left me alone. He just walked away like he wasn't the one to haul me out here and give me a lesson on the proper techniques of murder—something that I didn't even want. There's so much to process, but the thing that plagues me most is the question of what set him off. I'd spent the entire morning trying to upset him, and when I actually struck a nerve, I can't even tell which nerve I'd struck. Commenting on his manhood had resulted in him tricking me into maiming him, but even that didn't send him running off with his tail between his legs.

I could follow him and demand an answer, but would he talk to me? I look down at the knife in my hand and then at the still-wet splotches of blood in the dirt. He *let* me cut him. Used my momentum against me and took a blow without so much as a flinch, and for what? What was that supposed to teach me?

I don't want to go in just yet, so I stay like that for a long while, staring at the stained earth. Flashes of Jade and Teagan flit through my mind. Flickers of that last morning together. There was so much blood. What was it that Quinn said? Let the memories feed my anger, but then push them away.

I do just that, forcing myself to separate past from present. Quinn's blood is not Teagan's blood, nor is it Jade's. They're dead, and I'm alive. Their memories may haunt me, but they can't hurt me unless I let them.

It takes a long while, but soon the vision releases me and Quinn's blood becomes only his own. Perhaps with time, this will get easier and the numbness inside me, too, will dissipate. The only thing that managed to cut through the emptiness were those moments with Quinn last night, and the fleeting touches we'd shared today. It's not fair to him if I use him like that, but I don't want to keep feeling like this.

There's no telling how long I've been out here, but it's long enough. When I make it back to the kitchen, there's no sign of Quinn, but the scent of cooking meat still lingers in the air. In the exact spot where he'd lifted me onto the table just hours ago, now sits a plate of boar bacon. I tear into a piece, not minding that it's cold and I almost forget to chew. This is the first solid food I've had since getting sick, and my stomach demands more.

I walk around the table with another piece of bacon to find the mess from earlier already cleaned up. I hope the little mouse could fill his belly before Quinn interrupted him. He was right about the smell, too. Even with the air heavy with bacon, wisps of citrin still linger.

After lunch, still with no sign of Quinn and nothing else to do, I find myself in the library. It's smaller than the one in Lunae, but there's one major difference that makes this one better: it's not forbidden to me. I select a book at random and set it on the chair next to the fireplace. I've never had

to start my own fire, but how hard could it be?

Quite difficult, as it turns out, but after a good while of fumbling with the starter, the logs spark to life with a sharp crack. I curl up on the chair, letting the warmth wash over me, and flip open the book. It only takes a few chapters for me to realize that this is exactly the sort of book that would be banned in Lunae. Teagan tried to steal me one once so we could giggle over the smut, but right now as I absorb the words, the last thing I want to do is laugh.

Soon the images of the characters in my mind are replaced by more familiar faces. When the protagonist's lover shoves his fingers inside her, it's Quinn's fingers I imagine inside of me.

This is wrong. I should shut the book, if not throw it in the fire completely, but I want to feel it. I want to feel *him*. Before I even realize what I'm doing, I slip a finger inside myself and imagine it's Quinn's hand. In and out, faster and deeper, thumb rubbing at my core, until my neck arches and I drop the book with a pleasured cry.

Fuck.

If he heard me... But no sound comes. No footsteps, no cocky laugh full of smug satisfaction. I'm alone, and the Gods know I wish I wasn't. What is it about him that has me so...

At first, I can't think of the word until one pops into my mind as if out of thin air. *Flustered*.

I don't think it's exactly the word I was looking for, but it's close enough. I look towards the window to find that the sun is already setting. Somehow, I'd lost myself in written words and imaginings for the entire rest of the day.

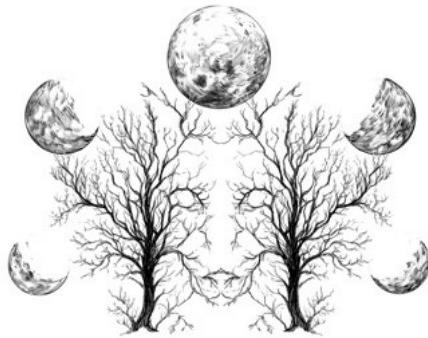
I could eat more, but the only hunger I feel now is the one that demands a repeat of last night. I leave the library and return to the room I'd shared with Quinn. It's empty, and although it doesn't surprise me, the wave of disappointment that hits me does.

I leave the door open—an invitation in case he comes by this way in the night—and crawl into bed. It feels too big without him now, as if last night had ruined it for me. I'd shared a bed with Teagan before when the nightmares were particularly bad, but I'd never felt like this in the days afterward. This small room feels far too large without him in it.

I run a hand over his place in the bed and will him to be there. I'd been awful to him today in the hopes that I wouldn't feel like this tonight, but it backfired and now I want nothing more than to pick up where we'd left off. Last night was a mistake, but some mistakes are worth making twice.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

QUINN



*F*lustered.

She makes me so fucking flustered. Here I am, minding my own business, when she sends me the mental image of my fingers inside of her. This is how she chooses to spend her free time? Reading smutty books in the library and fantasizing about me?

“Damnit,” I curse under my breath. This is worse than I thought. A mating bond is only a suggestion, and it’s obvious she hasn’t got a clue about the threads slowly weaving between us, but every time *that* happens, the fibres get a little stronger. If she’d just gone home when she was supposed to, I wouldn’t be alone in my tower with a throbbing bulge in my pants.

I could go to her. I know she wants me to. I can feel her in that room now, atop the bed waiting for me. With a single thrust inside her, I could put her little self-indulgence session to shame and make her scream my name so loud the walls vibrate with her pleasure.

But I won’t.

For once in my life, I’m going to do the right thing and stay locked in my tower. She’s safe, and if something happened, it’s not like I wouldn’t sense it.

A mate.

A godsdamn fucking mate.

As if my life wasn’t torture enough, the Gods had to bring someone else into it. She doesn’t deserve this, just as I don’t deserve her. I’m a monster, and nothing about this is right.

“Go to sleep,” I moan into my pillow. If she touches herself again, I don’t think I’ll be able to refrain from going down there. The thought of her around my cock again—

“Stop it!” I need to calm down. The bond is stronger on my end, but there’s still a chance she’ll sense my frustration and come looking for me herself.

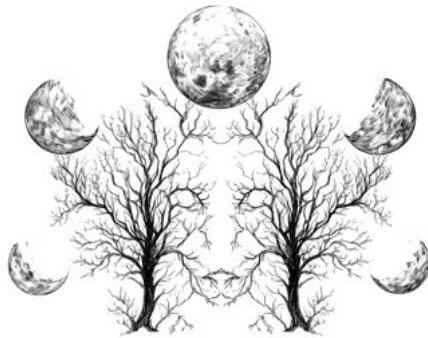
I am going to sleep, and it’s going to be terrible. It’ll be filled with nightmares and every single one of my worst memories, because that’s the way it’s supposed to be. Last night was a mistake.

Last night was amazing.

I roll over onto my side and curl up as tight as I can, as if the smaller I make myself, the less I’ll feel her three floors below me. Just one more night. I just have to get through one more night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ABBY



When he didn't turn up to breakfast, I devoted the rest of the morning to searching for him. He wasn't in his tower, nor was he in the library, the dining hall, or outside on the training grounds. I'd even checked the throne room, though I knew beyond a doubt he wouldn't be in there.

After exhausting all other options, I come to a stop just outside a pair of rose-covered doors. The last time I came here, he'd screamed at me to leave, but after what happened yesterday...

I push the door open as carefully as I can and poke my head through the small space. At first I don't see any sign of him, but then I glimpse movement by the altar in the center of the rose spiral. His back is to me, but the subtle tensing of his shoulders tells me he's aware of my presence. I guess I should be relieved that he isn't outright screaming at me.

"Quinn?"

For a long moment, I go unanswered. I consider leaving because he's made it clear that this is no place for me, but the ever-so slight tremble that runs through him gives me pause. It's not the fierce jerk of pain I've seen grip him before, nor is it the chill of an icy breeze.

I try again. "I know you don't want me here, but—"

"It's fine," he says, cutting me off. "I think I've been waiting for you." He turns to me, and there's a look on his face that I can't quite place. It's not unfriendly, but it's not exactly welcoming either.

I step through the door and let it fall closed behind me. The garden is just as breathtaking now as it was when I was here briefly. The air is far cooler than it was then, but the roses don't seem to suffer for it like the other flowers around the valley. "You're not planning to sacrifice me on that altar, are you?" It's a joke, but there's a thin layer of genuine concern behind the question.

He laughs softly, and with it some of the tension leaves his shoulders and the air between us. "It's not for sacrifices."

"So what's it for?" I feel like this is something I have no right asking, but curiosity gets the better of me.

"I'll show you."

I follow the spiralling path until I reach him in the very heart of the garden. Once again, my shawl rests atop the stone altar. I keep silent as he strokes a hand over the coarse hair and down the length of it.

"Her name was Klarissa," he says finally, and his words sting like the lash of a whip. Why did it never occur to me that the wolf that attacked during the Lunar Hunt was one of Quinn's people? I couldn't have known when I first arrived, but after witnessing the change for myself...

"I didn't know." I want to say more, but the words don't come. It's as if a shock-induced blockade

has formed in my throat, and I can't squeeze a word past it.

"That's why I got so upset when you were... You know." When I was *wearing* her.

"I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry. She attacked me, and—"

"I don't need to hear the details." There's no anger in his voice, but rather an absence of emotion. Wolves rarely attacked during the hunt, but Klarissa was far from the first. How many of his people has he lost this way?

"Will you tell me about her?" I regret the words the instant they escape my lips, but Quinn doesn't seem to mind them. In fact, I can almost swear his lips turn up in the slightest of smiles.

"She was a lot like you, actually."

"Highly intelligent, with a great sense of humour?"

He flashes me a sidelong glance. "Too stubborn for her own good. She was a risk-taker. I guess she carried that with her into this form."

"You seem like you were close."

He shrugs. "I enjoyed her company, but it wasn't anything more than that. The curse made sure I didn't see anyone very much, but she had a way of making me feel a bit less lonely."

So he and I both lost someone recently. Even if she wasn't a lover to him, it's obvious he cared for her. I wish he'd just told me so that I didn't fight him so hard over wearing the shawl. I know why he didn't, but my heart hurts just thinking about him and Tess and Ruben and who knows who else having to see me wearing what remained of someone they knew.

My eyes sting and I can't suppress the feeling before a tear slides down my cheek and drips onto the altar below. Quinn brings a hand to my cheek and wipes the trail away. "Don't."

"I'm sorry. I just—" A sob rips through me before I can finish.

"I didn't tell you this to make you feel bad. I was going to do this before you woke up, but instead, I've been standing out here for hours."

"Why?"

"I wanted you to see the one beautiful thing that comes with this curse."

Before I can ask, he waves a hand over the altar, and the fur ignites. I jump back, startled by the sudden appearance of flame, but his hands steady me. I watch, mesmerized, as the unnatural flame engulfs the pelt and then, after only a few seconds, burns itself out. Only a small pile of ash remains atop the altar.

"How did you do that?" Quinn can't be mageborn. He's never used magic before, and I've never heard of a sorcerer doing something like this.

"Just watch."

As if carried by a phantom wind, the ash floats up off the altar and spreads out around the garden in a spiral that matches the roses. It hovers in the air, shimmering slightly as if bathed in early morning sun, before falling over the flowers in a gentle cascade. The flowers themselves seem to welcome the ash, emanating a soft glow of their own.

"What kind of magic is this?" I've never seen anything like it, never mind something so equally sad and beautiful.

"This garden is a graveyard. Rosewood was named for the roses that grow naturally around this part of the forest, but *these* roses appeared after the curse. So long as our remains are burned atop this altar and our ashes become one with the roses, it's as if we'll never truly be gone." He touches a petal and rubs it gently between his thumb and forefinger. "It's the only thing I don't hate about the curse."

"King and commoner rest together as equals."

He smiles then, though the sadness behind it lingers. “Exactly.” We let the silence settle between us for some time, but eventually he speaks again. “You may not see me for a while.”

“You’re leaving again.” It’s not a question. I knew this was coming, but I’d hoped it wouldn’t be so soon.

“I would stay if I could, but—”

“But your curse is different.”

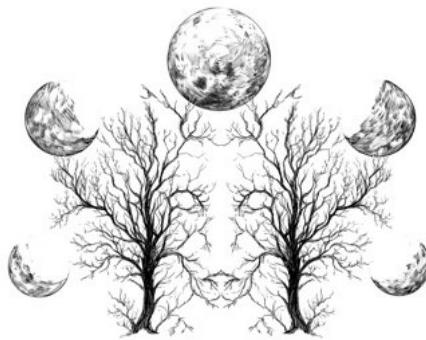
He brushes a lock of hair behind my ear, and the action seems to pain him. It’s as if I’m someone that matters to him, and this is our last goodbye. “Tess and Ruben will be back soon. They never wander far, so they’re always among the first to return. Everyone else should be back by the time the sun sets.”

“And you? When will you be back?”

He looks out to the forest, and the pain that radiates from him is almost tangible. “As soon as I can.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ABBY



I haven't seen Quinn since we spoke in the garden, but his words are still a vice around me. On the one hand, he's letting me stay—but he's the one leaving. I shouldn't care. So much has changed between us, but just as much hasn't. He's still an ass, the furthest thing from Prince Charming, and a small piece of me wants to hate him... but the rest of me can't. I think that, over time, I may even grow to like the prince. If he can ever get over himself, that is.

Tess waves at me with an air of embarrassment as she steps out of the woods. One by one, the wolves have been shifting back into their human forms and returning to the castle, fully clothed. Quinn must have put some clothes just beyond the tree line, or they have a stash somewhere. It makes sense that they would, though they could have just as easily become accustomed to their nakedness, and this is a courtesy to me.

Many are still in the woods, and those who are back are preoccupied with washing themselves after their stint in the forest. Which leaves me to myself. I shiver as a cold breeze brushes over me. Winter is just around the corner now, and any day now we might get the first snowfall. I wonder what happens to the roses in winter. When another gust hits me, I decide it's time to head inside.

"Going somewhere?"

The question has me whipping around to find Morgan standing just a few yards away. How long had he been there watching me in perfect silence? I notice then that, a little further behind him, two other men are speaking silently to one another, their eyes darting to me every few seconds. I've seen them around, but haven't yet spoken to them. They've kept to themselves, mostly.

"Inside. It's getting cold out." I cross my arms and rub them as if to underline the statement.

Morgan nods in agreement and glances up at the grey clouds above. It's late afternoon, but all traces of the sun have vanished. "Indeed. I can smell the snow in the air." He inhales deeply, as if savouring the scent. "You know what else a wolf's nose is adept at smelling? Fear." As he says that last word only just above a whisper, his lips twitch up into a grin that has me wanting to take a step backwards, but I hold my ground.

"Is that why you attacked me that day?" Maybe I shouldn't bait him, but he's looking at me like I'm his prey and my instincts are screaming at me not to turn my back on him.

"Oh, no, Princess. Why don't you come with me for a stroll through the woods, and I'll tell you all about it?"

I take a step back at the veiled threat in his words. He didn't come to apologize. He came to finish whatever it was the wolf in him had started. But why? What have I ever done to this man? His faint familiarity taunts me again, the knowledge of who he is teasing me from just out of reach.

My eyes dart around in search of the other two men. They've moved in opposite directions, encircling us, with the intent of getting behind me. I move to run for the castle before they can trap me, but Morgan's taunt stops me. "I wouldn't do that. Wolves enjoy a chase and if you run, I might not be able to stop them."

"I could scream."

"You could. But who would hear you?"

A hand slips around my mouth from behind. One man must have moved when I was distracted, and now holds me tight against him. The force of my struggle is no match for the animalistic strength still flowing through him. I kick with my legs, but the second man grabs them and hoists them up so that the two of them can carry me into the forest and away from anyone who might hear.

It can't have been more than ten minutes when I finally free a leg and kick the dark-haired man in the face. He drops me, and the other man relaxes his hold just enough to shift my head a fraction. It's enough, and I sink my teeth into the fleshy spot of his palm until I taste blood.

"You bitch!"

For one glorious second, I'm free, but then the agony of a boot to the side has me smashing against the ground. The taste of dirt melds with the metallic tang still coating my teeth. When my lungs finally work well enough to pull in a full breath of air without gasping, I lift my head to find Morgan crouching in front of me.

He pinches my chin between his fingers and thumb, forcing me to meet his stare through blurry eyes. "How unladylike."

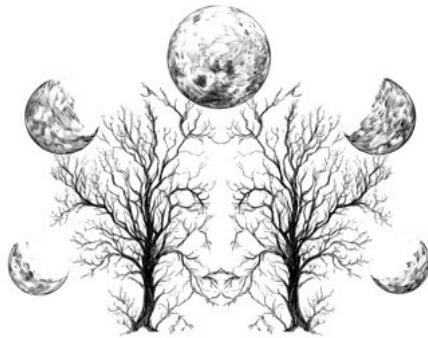
I pull away from him and reach for the knife tucked into my pants. I swipe for him, still blinded by tears and dirt, but feel no connection.

His laugh confirms it. "She has claws." His hand wraps around my wrist and squeezes hard enough to force a gasp through my lips and have my hand opening. The knife bounces between them and he snatches it before releasing me. "I think we've gone far enough. It's time we rectify a mistake."

He's going to kill me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

QUINN



“*Y*ou may as well say it.” Ruben has been giving me that look for some time now, and if I don’t let him unburden himself, then he might just explode. I’d asked him to lock me in a room again—just as I had once five years ago. I can acknowledge that this isn’t easy for him, but I can’t see any other options. If Abby is going to stay, then this is the only way I can keep her safe.

“You’re a fool.”

I actually laugh, because never once has Ruben been so brutally honest. It’s a pleasant change. For far too long, I’ve wanted him to treat me as a man rather than a prince, and this might just be the first time he’s done so. “Is that all?”

“What did you tell her?”

“That I’m going away for a while. I know I don’t have the right to ask this of you, but can you do your best to keep her and everyone else out of the tower? I’d rather her not hear me.”

He shakes his head. “You really think she won’t find out? Tess thinks you two are mates.” My eyes flick to his at the mention of the word and it’s confirmation enough. “Does she know?”

“Of course not.”

“You have to tell her. Now, before you shift. Do you know where she is?”

I always know where she is.

“I can’t.” Maybe that makes me a coward, but I don’t care. She’s going to find out I’m a monster eventually, but I can’t bear the thought of it being today. It would break me to have the knowledge of her hatred towards me being the last thing in my mind before I leave behind the man and embrace the beast.

He puts a firm hand on my shoulder, a pleading desperation just behind his eyes. “You’re like a son to me. Don’t make me lock you up again.”

I want to embrace him, but instead feel myself pulling away, just as I always do when warmth and kindness is offered. When I don’t answer, he lets out a heavy sigh. “I’ll check on you every day.”

He turns to go, but I call after him. “Ruben? Don’t open the door unless you’re sure. Promise me.”

“I swear it.” He shuts the door behind him and slides the thick metal rod into place.

It’s unnecessary, but I lock the five interior locks as well. At the very least, that will keep Abby out if she finds out I’m here. She’ll be furious, of course, but I’ll deal with that when the time comes. So long as she lives, I’ll gladly take her fury. Too many times I’ve awoken to find the people I care about torn apart by the creature I will soon become.

Not again. *Never again.*

The change is close. I can feel it building within me, slow and beginning in the pit of my stomach.

It radiates outwards, tensing and contracting the muscles and sending occasional jolts through my extremities. My neck arches and I think I might shift, but it settles again.

I pace the floor of my small, round room and wait in anxious frustration for consciousness to melt away. There's no telling how this time will be. I was human for an entire week, and I fear the monster will retaliate.

Another jolt hits me, but this one comes with something else. What was that? An emotion—but it wasn't mine. I focus on it, fighting to hold off the monster just a little longer when it hits me again.

Fear.

A vision comes just seconds later, an image seen through Abby's eyes. She's in the forest with three men—Morgan and his two pathetic followers. In Morgan's hand is a dagger. *Abby's dagger.*

'*He's going to kill me.*' Her ghostly voice hits me with enough force to knock the air from my lungs. He can't be that stupid! If he so much as touches her, I'll rip out his fucking throat!

"Abby!"

The wood creaks against the force of my body as I throw myself up against the door, fingers fumbling with the locks. The door won't budge, so I pound on it with all the force I can muster, borrowing whatever strength I can from the monster. "Ruben! Open the fucking door!"

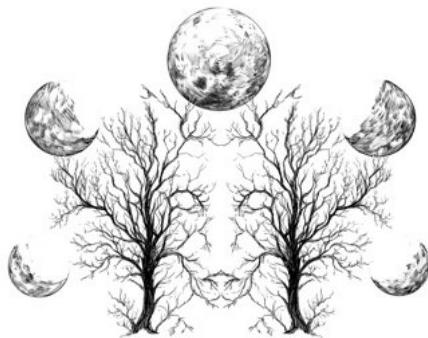
There's no answer. Even if he can hear me, he won't get to me in time. I pound on it over and over, the smashing of my fists matching the thundering of my pulse. She's going to die. I did all this to protect her, and it's going to be for nothing.

A jolt hits me, so powerful that when I regain enough control to open my eyes, I find myself on my knees. I gasp for a breath of air, shoving back the monster with the last of my strength.

I can't change now. I can't—

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

ABBY



“Are you sure about this?” The man I’d kicked asks. He’s shorter than the others, and probably younger. He looks like a person who was roped into something they don’t want to do, manipulated by those they look up to, and are now in too deep to turn back.

“It’s now or never, while everyone is distracted. Quinn will have eyes on her if we wait.”

“And why not never?”

His answer comes as a fist to the face, powerful enough to have him spitting blood. I’d kicked him with as much force as I could muster, and it hadn’t come anywhere close to that.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask to distract Morgan. He looks as if he wants to hit the man again, but turns his attention back to me.

“Because the so-called prince won’t.” He inches closer to me, moving like the predator he is.
“Tell me, Princess. Do you remember me?”

I’d thought he looked familiar the first time I saw him, but I still can’t place it. “You’re from Lunae.” I take in his confidence with the weapon, as if he’s been around them far longer than he’s been here. “A Guardian.”

He smiles. “Very good, but *which* Guardian am I?”

I don’t have an answer. Many Guardians wear their hoods up. There’s no need for them to show their faces, and even if they did, I can’t be expected to remember all of them. A few worked inside the palace, but many were stationed in the city and villages to control the people.

“Don’t tell me it wasn’t good for you.”

My brows tense together as I study his face. I’d sought companionship in the arms and beds of many Guardians, but I have no memory of ever being intimate with this man.

And then it hits me. All of my rendezvous with various Guardians had been consensual... except for one.

The memory—little more than the haze of a dream—comes back to me all at once. It was too dark in my room to see the man’s face when he’d slipped inside from the dimly lit hall. I was too stunned to be awoken in such a way that I didn’t cry out. The intruder didn’t hurt me, and it was over so quickly that I’ve often wondered if it could have been just another nightmare.

But now I know for certain that it wasn’t.

“I remember you,” I say with a defiant raise of my chin. There’s even more reason to fear him now, but that fear has melded into molten rage stirring deep within the pit of my stomach. “You’re just as much of a coward now as you were then. You didn’t bring me out here because you’re afraid I’ll go back to Lunae and tell my father about you and the other wolves. You’re just protecting yourself

from what Quinn will do to you when he finds out what you did to me.”

The two other men share uncertain glances, but Morgan’s eyes never leave mine. Hatred seethes within them, but he fights to keep control of himself. “This has nothing to do with that. What do you think that false king and witch of a queen will do if they find out about this place? Quinn is too weak to protect his people. He always has been.”

False king? Witch queen? He’s gone mad.

“You’ll never get away with this. You may kill me now, but what do you think Quinn will do to you when he finds out?”

He laughs. “Quinn is the reason we’ll get away with this.” He opens his arms wide and spins in a circle, raising his voice as if to show just how alone we are. “Look around you. The forest is empty. Not a monster to speak of. And do you know why that is? Because Quinn isn’t here. He’s locked himself up somewhere for the duration of this cycle, and when he’s human enough again to realize you’re gone, it will be all too easy to say you discovered the truth about him and fled. By then, there will be nothing left for him to find.”

He moves towards me, and I brace myself. Even if I still had my weapon, there’s no way I could survive with three against one. My only regret is that I could have at least taken him with me.

Someone screams and Morgan skids to a halt. I want to look for the source of the sound, but I can’t risk taking my eyes off the knife in Morgan’s hand. This could be my chance to run. If they’re distracted—

Something lands between us with a wet thud and I can’t stop myself from looking down. It’s the man I’d bit... or the top half of him, anyway. I can almost swear he blinks once before going completely still, the only movement being the entrails sliding out of him. Where his legs went, I can only guess.

“Fuck!” The curse came from the second man. He was standing just behind me, but his voice sounds farther away now as if he’s distancing himself from whatever did that to his friend. “You said he was locked up!”

Before Morgan can respond, a massive silver wolf leaps out from behind a thicket and stalks towards us, muzzle and forepaws coated in glistening red. It shows its teeth as a low growl ripples through it so deeply that I swear the earth trembles beneath me.

“Give him the girl,” Morgan says, panic evident in his voice.

The man moves for me, clinging to the hope that Morgan’s orders will somehow save his life. I know well enough that they won’t. This wolf is the monster that stalks the forest, and I’ve seen exactly what happens when it’s encountered. I feel the man’s hands against my back for only a second before I’m falling. I land hard on my hands and knees, and when the growl reverberates through the soil beneath me again, it’s much, much closer.

I pull in a sharp breath before lifting my head to face the animal only inches from me now. Its eyes swirl with the same red as the blood-stained earth beneath me. There’s something strange about those eyes, and the pounding of my heart shifts into a flutter. *I know those eyes.*

“Quinn?” The word comes out so soft that I’m not really sure I said it, but the wolf’s ears twitch. His eyes seem to soften, and for only a second, the striking scarlet dulls to a warm, molten amber.

His eyes shut tight as a fierce tremble rips through him. Bones crack as the animal’s body twists and bends at unnatural angles. Whimpers and growls turn to human groans as fur and flesh tear open. A human figure—tall and naked, with dark disheveled hair slick with traces of blood—emerges from the steaming, hollow carcass. It takes only seconds for what remains of the wolf to turn into a black sludge hardly noticeable against the soil.

Quinn seems unsteady on his feet for only a moment as he looks down at his now human hands. When he finally looks at me, there's nothing but shame in those eyes. That too only lasts a moment before unbridled rage overtakes him and his eyes lock on Morgan.

"You have ten seconds to tell me what the fuck you think you're doing. One." He moves with the speed of a wolf, and before he finishes counting to two, he's got his hands on the other man's head. With a sharp twist, the man's neck snaps and his body slumps to Quinn's feet.

"J—James..." Morgan can barely get the name of his friend out. "You killed him!"

Quinn steps over James' body, slowly closing the distance between him and Morgan. "I said you had ten seconds. Now you have five."

Morgan drops the knife and backs away with his hands raised in submission. "I don't deserve to die because you didn't have the balls to eliminate a threat."

Quinn's lips twist up into a vicious smile. "Oh, I'm not going to kill you."

"You're—You're not?"

Quinn's head turns and his eyes find mine. There's lust in them, but a kind of lust I've never seen in him before. This is raw, bloodthirsty savagery. He kicks the knife, and it skids across the dirt and patches of grass until it stops just in front of me. "Do you remember how to kill a man?"

He can't be serious. How can he expect me to just pick up the knife and kill a person like it's nothing? Maybe Morgan deserves it, and he was definitely going to kill me before Quinn showed up, but death is so final.

I don't have a chance to reach for the knife or refuse before Morgan is running. "Fuck this," he says under his breath.

Quinn picks up a sizeable rock in one hand and throws it with such force that when it connects with Morgan's shoulder, it sends him down with a sickening crack. It occurs to me that Quinn didn't miss. If he'd hit Morgan's head, he would have shattered the skull and killed him instantly.

'*This is your kill.*' I hear Quinn's voice in my head as clearly as if he'd spoken, but his lips never move. Still, by the way he's looking at me, I know he'd meant for me to hear them. How is that possible?

Quinn walks casually to the crawling Morgan and hoists him to his feet, holding his arms behind his back and keeping him in place. I pick myself up, knife in hand, and close the distance between us as if walking through a dream. Quinn tears open Morgan's shirt, leaving his chest and stomach exposed to me, as if this was just another lesson.

I close the remaining steps between us and press the tip of my blade against the flesh just below his ribcage, angled up just as Quinn had shown me. Can I really do it, though?

"Don't!" Morgan says, his voice breaking. So much for the bravado he'd shown earlier.

"Is this not how you would have killed me?" I ask, pressing the blade just hard enough for a single drop of blood to pool at the tip. He squirms—more from fear than pain—but Quinn holds him steady. Quinn doesn't say it, but I get the sense that he wants me to take my time. He'd stand here all day and night for this.

"You fucking bitch! I should have slit your throat when I had the chance."

I lean in close to him, standing on the tips of my toes to bring myself to meet his eye. "You fucking should have."

I drive the knife upwards, and he heaves for breath. It was harder than I'd imagined it would be to slice straight through flesh and muscle, so next time I'll have to remember to use more force.

Next time? Did I really just think about there being a next time? I shudder at the thought as hot blood runs over my hand and down my wrist. Morgan is dying, of that I'm sure, but it's a slow death.

At this rate, he'll be more likely to die from the injury to his lung than from blood loss. If I pull out the knife and allow the blood to flow, it will be over much quicker.

The question is, does he deserve that courtesy? I doubt he would have done the same for me. Still, I don't need to see the pain in his eyes longer than necessary. I don't want to hear his coughs and gasps for breath as he chokes on his own blood. His suffering doesn't take back any of what he took from me.

I pull the knife from him, and the river of red quickens. A flash of annoyance flickers across Quinn's face, but he says nothing. He may want to watch Morgan, revel in the fear in his eyes, commit the sounds of his demise to memory—but I don't. And, as he said, this is my kill.

Morgan coughs, and a bubble of blood explodes on his lips. I've lost all sense of time. It could be seconds or minutes that pass, but I refuse to look away from him until the light has left his eyes. When his head slumps forward, I know it's done.

"Well done, Stabby," Quinn says, his voice whisper-soft as he drops Morgan unceremoniously to the ground below.

I look down at the red smeared knife still clutched in my shaking hand, and want nothing more than to drop it—but I don't. I killed a man, and that will stay with me forever, but so too will the words from Quinn's lesson. *Never drop your blade.*

I slide my eyes up to him and find he's still watching me. This man I've gotten to know is the very monster that murdered Teagan and Jade. I should have known. How many times had he told me that his curse was different? And yet I refused to see it, refused to read between the lines. He disappears for weeks at a time with nowhere to go. His people turn into wolves under the light of the first full moon and remain that way until it wanes. The royal family was massacred, leaving only Quinn alive.

Where does the monster end and the man begin?

"Over there!" The shout comes from behind me, but my gaze doesn't leave Quinn. He hasn't moved and the rage that had been so clear in him just minutes before has dissipated entirely, leaving only some mixture of shame and resolve.

Footsteps are close behind me, but they come to a sudden stop when the people take in the scene before them. Three dead men, a naked Quinn, and me—bloodied knife tight in hand.

"Abby?" It's Ruben's voice I hear when someone takes a step closer. "Give me the knife."

"Don't touch her!" Quinn snaps, and Ruben stops just steps behind me. "I don't think she's finished." I know he's not talking about Morgan.

"Quinn—" Ruben tries to reason, but Quinn's not having it.

"No one stops her. Is that understood?"

I take their silence as confirmation. There's not a sound from the people gathered behind me or even the forest itself. It's like the world has gone quiet and is waiting on bated breath for me to choose a path. Morgan was a monster, but Quinn? He's killed innocent people. People I loved. He stole a future from me that could have been great. A life with a good man and my closest friend by my side.

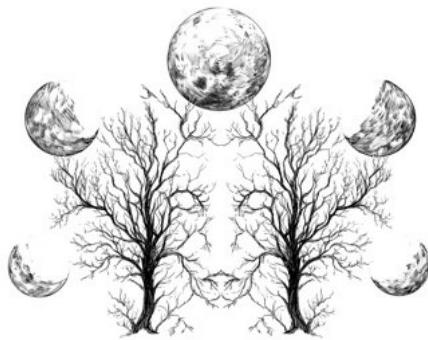
'Do it.' His voice in my mind nearly makes me jump. '*No one will intervene and you will not be punished.*'

I blow out a breath and turn away from him. "Take me back to Rosewood," I say to Ruben.

The relief on his face is glaring. He makes no move to take the weapon from me, but the hand he rests on the space between my shoulders is warm and beyond comforting. I let him lead me away from Quinn, not bothering to look back to see if he follows.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

QUINN



I watch her go, never once looking back at the monster she leaves behind. I couldn't follow her if I wanted to as my legs are like rooted trees, firm in their refusal to move from this spot.

Abby let me live. She could have killed me—should have killed me. Have I not done worse things than the man at my feet?

The thought of Morgan has a growl wanting to build inside me. I shouldn't be in this form, and the wolf writhing beneath my skin seems just as livid as I am. She was too merciful. He didn't deserve the clean death she gave him. It was hard enough not to tear him to pieces myself and respect her kill, but it was near unbearable allowing her to quicken the end to his suffering.

It wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

I kick him with my foot so that he rolls onto his back. His eyes are still open, that final look of shock forever etched on his face. If I could bring him back just so I could kill him again, I would. If I'd have gotten here only a minute later... If my rage hadn't been enough to reach the monster...

No. No, this isn't good enough.

Peeling the flesh from his bones now would give me no satisfaction, but there's something else that just might. Maybe it's the wolf in me, but at this point, I don't give a shit. I move around his corpse so that his head is just in front of me and force my body to relax enough to urinate.

"You got off easy. I should have ended you the first time you went after my mate."

Mate.

That's the first time I've said the word aloud, and it solidifies something within me. Part of me had remained uncertain about the bond weaving between Abby and I.

The idea of being able to feel each other's emotions, hear each other's thoughts seemed like an impossible magic—and yet it had been proven time and time again. I'd heard her voice when the monster killed her friends. She'd heard me call her frail when she was plagued by fever. I'd felt her fear when Morgan took her, and I know she'd heard me beg her to end my life.

Morgan's face had remained in my mind after I shifted. The memory is far clearer than it should be, as if I wasn't entirely wolf. I could hear Ruben on the other side of the door as I threw myself against it, tearing and clawing and shredding the wood. The fear that I would kill him just as I'd killed Evan was so potent it was almost tangible, but when I exploded through the door, turning it to little more than splinters and fractured metal, I moved past him without a second thought.

I rub the ribs on the right side of my body as I recall the sharp snapping of bone. I'd no doubt broken a few of them in my desperation to break free, but they'd healed over almost completely when my body reformed. All that remains is a dull ache that will likely dissipate entirely before the sun

rises tomorrow. That is—if I'm still human by then.

I shouldn't even be human now. When I'd locked eyes with Abby in that form, when I saw Morgan preparing to run, I knew I had to be human for this. There's no guarantee I would have remembered his death after the wolf left me, and I needed to remember it. I'd grappled with the beast, and much to my surprise, it relinquished.

Abby is alive, and that alone is the one good thing the monster ever did. It may not make up for all the lives it's taken—I've taken—but it's a fucking start. And more than that, for whatever reason, Abby decided that I deserve to keep breathing. She may change her mind, and if that happens, I won't stop her. I took people from her, so she can have me in any way she desires. Even if things were different, there's no point in fighting it now. Whether I meant to or not—whether I wanted to or not—I've accepted the bond between us.

I may not deserve to have even an ounce of happiness after the things I've done, but lying to myself isn't going to change the fact that I love her. She's infuriating and stubborn and an absolute pain in my ass, but I fucking love her.

Perhaps this is the cruellest curse of all. Opening myself up to that, allowing even the smallest fraction of hope that she might one day feel the same... Hope is dangerous. There's not much left of my heart to tear to pieces, but I've protected what remains of it for five long years. Giving it to her now? That will either save me... or it will destroy me.

I think of the scars on her back and the monster twists inside me. Not because it wants to take over, but because it wants the same retribution for her that I do. I could leave right now and kill everyone in Lunae if I wanted to. I could inflict the same pain she suffered on her so-called father, and I would revel in every second of it. Ten, twenty lashes for each and every one of hers. His death would be slow. Even if she begged for his life, I don't think I would allow the same mercy she showed Morgan today.

I feel a slight tug on the bond that calms me. I don't think she'd meant to do it—she probably doesn't yet understand this thing between us.

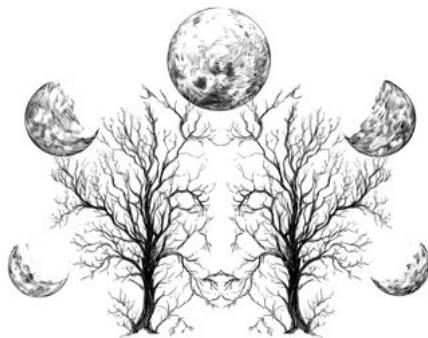
Abby's fear is ever present, but it's only simmering now. I can feel the heat of steam and detect the faintest hint of rose water. Tess has no doubt drawn her a bath and is forcing tea down her throat.

That's good. They'll be there for her when I can't.

How can I face her again? She finally knows the truth of what I am. She may have shown mercy to two people today, but that doesn't mean she'll ever forgive me. How can she when I can't even forgive myself?

CHAPTER THIRTY

ABBY



I step out of the bathing room with a towel wrapped tightly around myself, and I feel as if I might fall apart without it. The hollowness inside me has grown, and if it weren't for the cloth holding me together, I might just turn to ash and float away on the wind.

Tess is waiting for me on the edge of my bed, just as I knew she would be. There's a small table set up in front of her, topped with tea and a steaming bowl of something else. I move to the bed and bring a heaping mouthful of stew to my lips before she can order me to eat. If there's a chance food will fill the void within me, I'm not about to argue.

"Has he come back yet?" I ask after two more spoonfuls. The fact that she hasn't said a word since I exited the tub has me feeling there's a lot she'd like to say but doesn't know how to.

"No, he hasn't. I'm not so sure he will." There's a sadness in her eyes that seems so wrong on her usually cheerful face. Tess has been the embodiment of positivity since I arrived, so to see her like this is entirely wrong. How did things get so fucked up?

I yearn to take that sadness away from her, and trip over the words that come flooding out of me in a feeble attempt to reassure her. "But he was human. I mean, he was a wolf, but he changed back. He _____"

Tess shushes me and pulls me in close against her. I should be comforting her, not the other way around. "Listen to me," she says, giving me a small squeeze. "What's happening with him is new. For the last five years, he's only been human a week at most out of a month. Usually it's no more than the three days the full moon changes the rest of us. Until you came along."

"What's so special about me?" I don't understand how my arrival here could have affected the curse so strongly. It seems ever since the monster—*Quinn*—spared my life, it's had a rippling effect in the lives of others.

Tess shrugs. "I've known Quinn his entire life. From the moment I pulled him from his mother, I've watched him grow into the man he is now. He made a mistake, trusted the wrong person, and became that creature. He killed his entire family and at least a hundred more. He lives with that guilt every single moment that he's human, and so he spent less and less time as such. I was beginning to fear that one day he just wouldn't change back."

Her voice cracks and tears well in the corners of her eyes. She loves Quinn deeply, but there's the faintest glimmer of something else there, too. Her life was altered irrevocably by whatever choices led him to this fate, and no amount of his guilt can change that.

"Don't you hate him for what he did to you?" I ask, needing to know for myself as much as for her. I could have killed him in the forest, but it would do nothing for his people, nor would it bring anyone

back.

"I was angry at first, but hating him would be misdirected. He was cursed, and that curse spread. He punishes himself enough that any ill will from me or anyone else would be a waste. We're a family as much as we are the remnants of a kingdom." She takes my hand in hers and holds it tight. "He took the people you love. Your feelings are your own and I won't shame you if you decide to let anger and hate fill your heart. I just want you to know that, so long as you choose to stay here, you can be part of this family."

I'd never thought of these people as a family, but it's the perfect word to describe them. Tess is like a mother to Quinn, and Ruben a father. He's lucky to have them after losing everyone else. But the rest of the people? Many of them have been nothing but kind to me, but there are others that still seem wary. "Are there others like Morgan?"

Tess seems to understand my meaning. Morgan had other motives, but he and his friends still shared the sentiment that I was a danger to them and their kingdom—their family. Even if I could accept Quinn for what he is, how can I ever expect to feel safe here when I'm so hated by a fraction of his people? Today was a fluke. He won't always be there to protect me, and I don't want him to be. I don't want my safety held entirely in the hands of others. I have two hands of my own.

Tess sighs. "Possibly, but after today, I doubt anyone would even think about harming you. Morgan was a fool for not realizing that Quinn has already claimed you."

I blanch. "*Claimed me?* What the fuck does that mean?"

Tess flinches at the harshness of my words, but I can't bring myself to regret them. Claiming implies ownership, and Quinn most certainly does not own me. If that's what he thinks, then maybe I made a mistake in the forest.

"Forgive the poor choice of words. It means something different to us than it does to you. You should really drink your tea before it gets cold."

I ignore her attempt at distraction. "Tell me what it means to you."

"I've said too much already. It wasn't my place. I thought Quinn would have at least told you something, but it seems he's still a boy in many ways."

I pick up the teacup and tip it to my lips. The water is just barely warm now, but the fresh flavours dancing on my tongue have an immediate calming effect. "What's in this? I feel..."

"Better? Good. Tea is for more than just sipping, dear. It can have medicinal properties as well. I made yours to help with relaxation and pain."

"I'm not in pain." Bruises have formed on my knees from my falls and a rock must have nicked my palm, but neither of those injuries can be felt over the depthless void inside me.

"Pain comes in many forms." I suppose she's right. Now if only she had a tea that could take away this numbness.

"Please tell me what you meant." My body has relaxed significantly, and it seems my tone has too.

"Don't tell me you haven't felt the bond between you two. I wasn't certain of it at first, but when you fell ill and he refused to leave your bedside... He moved whenever you moved, breathed when you breathed. Mating bonds are rare, but I'd stake my life on it that you two share one."

My head is absolutely swimming now, and I don't think it has anything to do with the cup still clutched in my hands. Mating bonds, magic, curses. It's all too much. None of this is talked about in Lunae. I've seen enough proof that curses are real, but what else? The dragons of old and Marein sirens may as well exist, too. Is anything truly impossible?

I should be caught up on the existence of such a bond, but a different question forces its way out. "Can more than one bond exist at a time? I'm not sure if I believe any of this, but..."

“Someone you lost?”

I nod before lowering my head so she can’t see the reddening of my eyes. If Quinn and I share some sort of magical bond, then logic would dictate that the only other person who made me feel this way was also connected to me in some way. “From the first moment I saw him, something clicked inside me. From then on, I could always feel when he was close.”

“Bonds are magical. They only exist when at least one person is something more than human. Was this man—or woman,” she adds with a smile, “human?”

The question takes me off guard. “Of course he was human. And so am I.”

“Then a bond is unlikely. But yes, I suppose bonds could overlap. It doesn’t mean anything, you know. The bond. You don’t have to accept it. Ruben and I didn’t. Not entirely, anyway.”

“You and Ruben?” That shouldn’t come as a surprise to me. How many times have I seen them share only a glance and feel like an entire conversation had passed between them? They always seem to know where the other is, so they must be able to hear each other’s thoughts just as Quinn sent his words to my mind. I wonder if he would hear me now if I tried to speak with him.

I shut that thought down as quickly as it comes. I’m not ready to talk to him, and I’m not entirely sure I ever will be.

“He lost his wife, and I my husband,” Tess explains. “We’d been friends for years, and when the curse took us... We chose to remain loyal to those we’d lost, so the connection we share became one of friendship and comfort. It made for keeping an eye on Quinn all the easier too.” She laughs. “Your will is your own. You don’t have to let magic dictate who you hold in your heart.”

“Quinn knows about this, right? If we have a *mating bond*?” Gods, that feels so ridiculous to say.

She hesitates, as if knowing her answer will only get the prince into trouble, but in the end, she chooses honesty. “He absolutely would. He’s the non-human, so the magic that cursed him is the magic weaving threads between you now. He should have told you.”

I down the last sip of my tea and scrape the bottom of my bowl for one last spoonful of stew. It did nothing to quell the storm of emptiness swirling within me, but filling my belly was a relief in its own right. I can’t talk about mating bonds and magic anymore, but I don’t think I could bring myself to sleep either. Quinn is still out there, and he may not even be human. I’m going to have to face him eventually, but that’s the last thing I want to think about now. I need a distraction.

“Quinn said something about you being a storyteller.” That’s not exactly what he said, but asking if she’d filled my head with tales of Dragoria is pretty much the same thing.

Her laugh is almost musical, and she looks as if with that one question I transported her back to a precious memory. Perhaps one where she’d told Quinn some of the very stories I’m looking to fill my dreams with now. “He did, did he? Well, it was my grandmother who was the true storyteller. I can’t tell them as well as she could.”

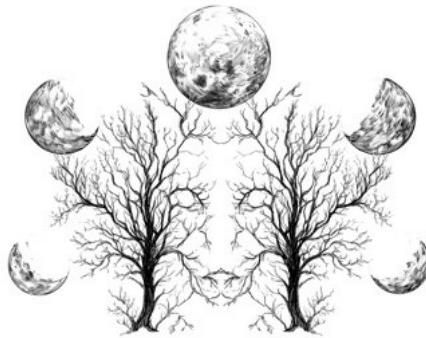
“Could you tell me one? I should get some rest, but my mind won’t slow down. I don’t think any amount of your tea will fix that.”

Her smile is warm, and all traces of the earlier sadness in her eyes seems to have vanished entirely. “Nothing would make me happier.”

She takes the bowl from me and moves the table away while I slip under the covers. Bedtime stories are usually told by a mother to a daughter, so it’s an experience I never thought I’d have. I may be an adult, but I don’t think it’s possible to be too old for this. I’ll have to tell Tess tomorrow just how eternally grateful I am for the kindness she continues to show me, but for now? I’m going to lose myself in stories of other people’s lives. Let them slay the dragons, navigate mating bonds, and break curses. My own problems can wait.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

ABBY



I don't know if it had to do with Tess' stories or the knowledge that one less monster breathes, but I awoke this morning feeling more refreshed than I have in ages—and without a nightmare to speak of.

I still don't know where I stand when it comes to Quinn, but thanks to the peaceful night of rest, I feel as if I can stomach talking to him. It goes beyond what he is now. After what Tess told me about the bond growing between us, I need to figure out exactly what he is to *me*.

After slipping on a pair of simple brown pants and an off-white lace shirt, I head downstairs with purpose. I'd meant to burst right through the castle doors on the warpath to speak to Quinn, but Tess' voice catches my attention and has me striding to the usually empty dining hall instead.

Tess is standing in the center of the large room, a flurry of activity around her in all directions. She barks orders at everyone she sees, giving them various instructions ranging from the re-fluffing of curtains to the correct placement of tables and chairs. I make my way over to her—at great personal risk to myself—and tap a finger on her shoulder. “Tess?”

She startles, and spins around to face me, hand flat against her chest. “Oh, Abby. You startled me. Is there something you need?”

“How about an explanation?” I say with a laugh as Ruben walks by carrying six chairs in his brawny arms, wooden legs poking out in all directions. He glances at Tess and then nods once before changing trajectory and moving to a different part of the room to set down his chairs. I don't need to ask that she'd given him instructions silently through their bond, and seeing it work in such a casual manner is almost a relief. I have the freedom to refuse whatever it is that's growing between Quinn and me, and perhaps one day, we could be just like Ruben and Tess.

“It's going to snow tonight,” she says with so much joy that I must be missing something. What does snow have to do with fancying up the dining hall?

“So... You need a thousand candles to keep us warm?” I'm sure that number is way off, but I've never seen so many candles placed around one room. Long tables are speckled in them, just as great candelabras line the stretch of open space in the very center of the room.

Her laugh is musical. “Oh, you're a funny one, aren't you? No, this is for First Frost.” She must see the confusion on my face, because she expands on her answer without prompting. “Quinn's mother loved snow. In honour of that, she insisted we hold a celebration on the night of the first snowfall. It's a night of food, music, dancing. You'll love it.”

“It sounds incredible. You do this every year?” I can't remember the last time we had anything resembling a ball in Lunae. I was far too young to attend it, though I have the faintest fog of a memory

of me with my ear pressed against the door of my chambers, desperate to hear the music wafting through the palace like ghosts. I'd taken dancing lessons, of course, but never had the chance to put those lessons to the test. I doubt it would matter, anyway. Rosewood probably has their own set of unique dances.

Tess' face falls only a fraction. "Well, no. We actually haven't done this since she died. Quinn's father was distraught at the loss of his wife. He banned any reminders of her, so it's been..." she pauses to think and counts on her fingers. "Oh, about fifteen years now."

Fifteen years? "So then, why do it now?"

"Because I think we finally have something to celebrate."

Ruben walks by with another armful of chairs, once again putting everyone else with a single chair in their arms to shame.

"Quinn is still in the forest. I'm not sure he'll be much in the mood for a celebration." I'm not trying to bring her mood down, but I can't see how she could think this year would suddenly be any different. If it was just about the late king, music and dancing would have returned after his death. Quinn chose to keep these events from happening, and I don't blame him for that in the slightest. What is there to celebrate when your family is dead and your kingdom is cursed?

Her soft smile is unexpected. "You're going out there to talk with him, aren't you?"

"Is it that obvious?"

She takes my hand in hers, and the warmth of her touch fills me with a resolve I didn't know I needed. "I have every confidence that if anyone can bring him back to us, it's you."

I think her confidence is misplaced, but I don't bother saying it. "And if he won't talk to me? Or if he refuses to leave the forest?"

Tess shrugs and returns to surveying her helpers. "Then we'll have a party without him."

I move for the massive doors that lead out of the castle, still laughing to myself. The laughter only dies when my eyes fall upon the forest that seems so much more ominous under the grey sky above. Just within those trees, my *mate* waits.



Come on, Abby. You're braver than this. I don't know how long I've been standing at the edge of the woods, but it's long enough to be shameful. Quinn could be anywhere, and there's no guarantee that he'll hear me if I call for him, but what does it say about me if I don't try?

"Quinn?" I say, more to myself given how quiet the word was. The silence that answers is almost offensive, though it shouldn't be. I can't expect him to hear me when I barely speak his name, but the fact that I have to be out here doing this at all is infuriating.

"Quinn!" His name stretches much farther than time, but again there's no answer.

He's hiding out there—quite possibly human—because he can't bear to face me. Why else wouldn't he have come back with us yesterday? If he wants me to hate him, he's off to a great start.

"You fucking coward!" I scream as loud as I can, not worrying about all the other people who might hear me. I can just see Tess shaking her head right now as she directs Ruben with another bunch of chairs. "Don't make me come in there after you! I know you can hear me!"

Soft chuckles sound behind me, and I glance over my shoulder to find a crowd gathering. Much to my surprise, Ruben is among them. I guess they heard me inside the castle after all. He moves to my

side, arms crossed but relaxed, lips curved as if he's fighting the urge to laugh too. "It's really none of my business and if you want to keep shouting at the trees, I won't stop you, but that's probably not the best way to reach him."

"I can scream louder," I grumble, though I really doubt I can.

He laughs this time, but forces the seriousness to return to his face and his voice. "I'm sure the entire forest can hear you as it is."

"Then where is he?"

Ruben's smile fades, the last traces of humour gone now. "If you were in his position and he was the one out here calling you a 'fucking coward' loud enough for your entire kingdom to hear, would you come running?"

Shame washes over me at the thought. "Probably not."

"If you want to talk to him, just ask. He may not come, but it's his choice. If you mean to scream at him, you may as well do it right here and now. There's no such thing as privacy when everyone around you has the hearing of a wolf."

He leaves me, whistling to himself as he goes, before saying to the crowd of onlookers, "Let's get back to work before Tess has our heads."

"Fuck," I say under my breath, fully aware that some of them probably heard that too. I didn't consider that their wolf senses might be carried over to their human forms, and will have to remember to ask someone just how good it is. Tess, probably, unless Quinn ever mans up.

I groan because this is as much my fault as it is his. Ruben was right, so I breathe through the remainder of my frustration and begin anew. "Quinn?" I say his name as softly as I can, given the circumstances in the hopes that it conveys no ill will. "I just want to talk."

Nothing.

No sign of movement in the trees or sounds from the forest. Somehow, though, I know he's listening. If what Tess said about the bond was true, shouldn't I feel him?

I let my eyes fall closed and reach deep within myself, searching for something that shouldn't be there. "Please come back." I think the words as much as I say them, feeling them in every part of myself.

I can almost swear the breeze itself sighs.

Before I can bring myself to walk away, I spot him moving through the forest in my direction. He's dressed now, so either my theory of a cache of clothing was correct, or Ruben went back into the forest last night or this morning to bring him some. That's a small mercy, as this conversation will be difficult enough without him hanging free.

He comes to a stop about ten feet from me, eyes cast down and refusing to meet my stare. His expression is utterly unreadable, but I can sense the swirling unease within him. He stays like that in total silence, evidently leaving all the talking to me.

"Have you been there this whole time?" He doesn't answer, so apparently this is going to be a one-sided conversation. Nevertheless, I want to avoid prying ears, if at all possible. "Take me somewhere we can have some measure of privacy."

His jaw ticks, and that's the only sign that he heard me. A moment later, he turns on his heel and moves back towards the trees. He doesn't tell me to follow him, but doesn't object to it when I do. After a few minutes of walking and wondering if he's doing as I'd asked or just trying to get away from me, we come to a swift-flowing river. A few minutes more of following it upstream, and he comes to a stop beside a towering waterfall.

A cold wind blows and I wonder if this waterfall will freeze in the heart of winter. I can just

imagine how breathtaking it would look, covered in icicles and sparkling in a winter sun.

"The waterfall will mask our voices," he says, keeping his own devoid of emotion. "Unless you mean to shout again. If so, I can't make any guarantees." He offers me what could be a sheepish smile, but it falls flat. There's an awkwardness between us now that has never been there before, and neither of us seems to know how to navigate it.

I wanted to speak with him more than anything, but now that we're face to face, the words elude me. "Can we just sit for a minute? I need to get my thoughts in order."

Without a word or any show of judgement or annoyance, he claims a spot on a thick patch of grass and lies down. He stares up at the treetops and small cracks of sky, one leg bent upright at the knee and hands behind his head. He stays like that, silent and unmoving and I envy how relaxed he looks.

Seeing him that way sparks something in me. "You look very relaxed for someone who just killed two men."

He doesn't move, but his eyes shift to meet mine. "How did *you* sleep last night?"

His answer only infuriates me more because he has me pegged. I'd woken this morning with such peace at the knowledge that Morgan was dead... and that I'd been the one to make sure of that. Quinn gave me that gift. He allowed me to slay my own monster so that there would never be a question in my mind or soul that I was safe from him.

"If you expect me to thank you, it's not going to happen. I'm a murderer because of you." *I should* thank him. Why can't I say it?

He sits up, giving me his full attention now with a slight tilt to his head. "You're free because of me. But that's not what you want to talk about, is it?"

"Are you genuinely asking, or did you read my mind?"

He runs a hand through tangled hair, but doesn't seem to mind when his fingers pull at knotted strands. "I can't read your mind, just as you can't read mine."

"But you've heard my voice in your head." It's not a question. I know it's the truth.

'Yes.' I startle because he didn't say the word, but I heard it all the same.

"So Tess was right. You and I are..."

"Mates?" He makes himself comfortable again. "No. Not unless we accept the bond."

"And have you accepted the bond?" This is the most pressing question. I can't begin to process what he might be to me without knowing what I am to him. The rage and fear I'd seen in him yesterday at the thought of losing me has to be more than just magic flowing between us.

He watches the waterfall for a long moment, and I allow him the time to choose his words. This isn't a conversation that should be rushed. "I'm honestly not sure if I can." He glances at me before adding, "You're angry I didn't tell you."

"I am."

"You would have been angry if I told you."

"Probably." *Definitely.*

"There's a lot you can blame me for, but this one thing has nothing to do with me. I didn't ask for it. I didn't want it."

That may be true, but his curse is the reason for all of this. "I thought only non-humans can trigger a bond. Since I'm human, I think I can blame you for this." I'd meant it as a joke to lighten the tension in the air around us, but he doesn't so much as crack a smile. Instead, he pulls his knees up to his chest and hugs his legs to him.

"Very well. This can be my fault too." There's so much sadness behind those words, that I can't stop myself from joining him on the ground. He seems so small like this, and the furthest thing from a

monster.

"I don't blame you for this. And I don't blame you for..." I trail off because I'm not ready to say those words, and if I ever do say them, I want to be certain of the truth behind them.

He places a hand against my cheek and runs his thumb down my lips. "Yes, you do."

"I don't want to hate you."

"You should." The agony in those words squeezes at my heart, and it's more than just the bond between us. Tess was right when she said that Quinn hates himself enough for everyone. I knew he struggled, but somehow I'd missed just how deep that hatred ran. He may have done some truly horrible things, but is a monster capable of this level of guilt and self-loathing?

I need to get his mind away from that place, so I grasp for any distraction I can find. "Will you burn the bodies?" It's not the happiest question, but at least it pulls him back.

He laughs once, but not because anything is funny. "No. They get to rot in the woods as nature intended."

I look down at my hand, empty and no longer covered in blood, but can still picture it. I hear Morgan's desperate gasps for air and the sound he made when he finally succumbed. The image only dissipates when Quinn slips a tentative hand around mine.

"I have more blood on my hands than you could ever imagine, so believe me when I say that it makes a difference when the life you take is someone who truly deserves it. Don't let that fucker haunt you."

I study his face and the absolute honesty that lives there now. "Why did you let me kill him? You were so filled with rage, I thought you were going to rip him apart." I don't add the fact that he *did* rip one of them apart, and they'd barely touched me.

"It wasn't easy, and I almost didn't let you. I got my revenge in the end, though."

"I'm afraid to ask," I say, and a smile very nearly breaks on his lips.

"And I'm afraid the truth will upset you."

"I don't want you to lie to me anymore. Ever. No matter how horrible it is. If we're going to be friends, those are my terms."

"Friends?" He laughs. "Alright, *friend*. I pissed on him."

"You..." I study his face for any hint of a joke, but he's completely serious. A laugh rips through me, and even the shame I feel isn't powerful enough to stop it.

It must be infectious, because he joins me. "You're laughing? I thought you'd be disgusted."

"I am disgusted!" I have to shout the words, otherwise they would have had no hope getting out over the fit of laughter. I can never tell another living soul about this, and I'll probably have to take it up with the Gods one day, but for now I'll laugh.

There's a break in the clouds somewhere above us and a stream of sunlight trickles in through the spaces between the trees offering us some reprieve from the frosty wind. Quinn leans back on his hands and tilts his head so that the sunlight kisses his face. "This is nice," he says as much to himself as to me. "I never get to feel this."

"I'm sure you lounge in the sun enough as a wolf." How easily those words came out surprises me, but I ignore it and focus on his answer.

"Maybe, but I rarely remember it."

"Start from the beginning. I want to know everything."

For a moment, I think he won't tell me, but when he runs a hand through his hair, I know the truth is coming. I wonder if he realizes that he has an honesty tell. "About five years ago, a sorceress came to Rosewood. People rarely ventured this deep into the forest, so having a new face—especially a

woman as beautiful as her—was a sight to behold. She said she had things to discuss with my father, but whatever it was, he wouldn't hear of it. He had her bound and imprisoned."

"Do you know why?"

Quinn shrugs. "He felt she was a threat, and it turns out he was right."

"Did she escape?"

When his eyes meet mine, I see nothing but deep regret. "No. I wish I could say she bewitched me into freeing her and taking her to my bed, but that would be a lie. I had a voracious appetite when it came to women. From the instant I saw her, I had to know how she would feel around my cock." He glances at me, almost ashamed, but I don't react. I told him I wanted the whole truth in all things, and I meant it.

"Go on."

"I never found out." He holds out his wrist to me. I examine it, but can't see what he's trying to show me until he points out five small scars, each in the shape of a crescent moon. "When she dug her nails into me, it was as if I could feel a poison run up my arm and then down through the rest of me. I was completely paralyzed while she sat atop me."

"Did she...?" I don't know how to ask that question.

"No, she wasn't interested in that. She pulled out a vial that was tucked away in the bosom of her dress, and poured the contents down my throat. I don't know what it was, but it tasted of blood and burned all the way down. Then she was gone." His brows crease at the memory. "If I hadn't been so concerned with wetting my dick, she wouldn't have had the opportunity to turn me into that *thing*."

I weave my fingers through his, hoping to quell the anger building inside him. "Was that night the first?"

His answer comes with a squeeze of my hand. "Yes. When I awoke three days later, my father and sister were dead. Along with thirty-one others. I tore them all apart to such a degree that it was impossible to tell where one body ended and another began. Three survived the attack, but they'd been bitten. By the next full moon, they turned too."

"That's why you locked yourself away. You were trying to protect your people."

"I'd been in that room nearly three weeks before my brother ordered Ruben to unlock the door. I'd stopped answering, and he was afraid of losing me, too. To starvation, or other means... When they got the door open, I wasn't me."

I know how this story ends, so he doesn't bother to say it. Ruben lived, Evan didn't. "It's not your fault. You tried to keep them safe."

He pulls his hand from mine and stares down at it, flexing his fingers as if this was the first time he was seeing them. "With every passing month, I became less and less human. This body feels so foreign to me now. As if the wolf is my true self, and this is the mask." His neck arches, and he sucks in a breath as if the monster inside him is showing its agreement.

"Will you change again?"

He shrugs. "I feel like I could right now if I let myself, but for the first time, it feels like I have a choice."

I stand and hold out a hand to him. "So then choose to come back with me."

"I don't think I belong there anymore." His eyes slide from me to the depths of the forest which seems to beckon to him on a cellular level.

He's come too far. There's no way I'm going to let him run from this. "Do you know what your people are doing right now?"

He looks back at me, curiosity brimming in his eyes. "Actually, no. I was wondering what the

activity was.”

“They’re preparing for First Frost.” Thankfully, I remembered the name.

“What?” He jumps to his feet. “What for?”

“Apparently it’s going to snow tonight.” He rolls his eyes at my non-answer and waits for me to explain. “Tess wants a party. Are you going to deny her that?”

“Tess has wanted a party for fifteen years. Why tonight?”

I take his hand and pull him in the direction of Rosewood, no longer giving him the option to stay. Of course, he’s stronger than I am, and it takes no effort to plant his feet in such a way that moving him on my own is impossible. “Because she loves you, and she wants you to come home.”

“I don’t know if I can do that. If I turn—”

“If it gets to be too much, I’ll lock you up myself.”

He laughs. “No, you won’t.”

“Then stay in your room all night if you want to. Just come back to the castle. This forest isn’t your home, the people who love you are.”

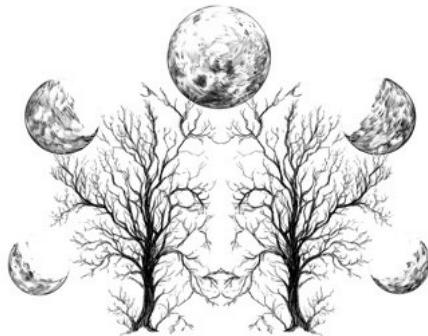
He nods, but doesn’t move. “I’ll come with you, but you need to tell me something first.”

“Whatever gets your ass through those doors so I don’t have to disappoint Tess.”

“Why didn’t you kill me?”

I wasn’t expecting that question, and it never occurred to me that he might ask it. He waits in patient silence for me to find the answer. It may not be what he’s looking for, but it’s the best I can offer. “Because I saw the divide between monster and man.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



*T*his is a mistake.

Why did I let her talk me into this? I should have known that Abby giving me permission to lock myself away for the night was entirely different than Tess allowing me to do so—which she most certainly is not. She'd given me the very specific instructions of: scrubbing the wolf off myself, combing the knots out of my hair, dressing like a prince for once, and getting my tush down to that party.

So far, I have done three of those things.

My room in the tower is still uninhabitable after the monster tore it apart, so I moved my things down to the room I'd shared with Abby. There are other bedchambers, but none have a locking door as strong as this one. If I feel the change coming on, this is the best place for me.

I glance at myself in the mirror—*just a glance*, because my reflection hasn't felt right for years—to ensure that I meet Tess' criteria. I have a feeling she'll take issue with my attire, but it's not like I had a lot of options. I was nine during the last Frost Ball, so I can't very well wear the same suit I wore then. The suit I wear now is a tad plain, and not anywhere near the expected white or ice blue colour code, but the fact that I'm taking part in this charade at all should be good enough.

My father wasn't a wicked man, but when he lost my mother, he couldn't stand to be reminded of her. First Frost was a holiday she decreed, and the Frost Ball was her favourite part of it. She loved music and dancing, so when she died, the music died with her. I didn't share his sentiments, but I can't say I'm much in the mood for celebrating, either.

A knock sounds on the door and it slides open before I can get there. “I hope you’re decent, because I’m coming in.”

Of course Tess would come looking for me. I wouldn't be surprised if she thought I would find a window to climb through because she no doubt has eyes on the doors. “No, I wasn’t going to run. I was just about to head down.”

She looks me up and down and then shakes her head with an annoyed huff. “Not wearing that, you’re not.”

Here we go. “What’s wrong with it?”

“What isn’t wrong with it?” She pushes my arms away from my chest and tugs at the lapel. “Who wears brown to the Frost Ball? Are you trying to look like mud?”

I’m finding it impossible to think up a decent argument to use against this woman. She herself is done up in a simple yet refined off-white gown. Her shoulders are bare, but it only accentuates the string of pearls around her neck—a gift from my mother many years ago. I long to reach out and touch

them, but I keep my hands firmly at my sides.

"Must I remind you that I've grown a fair bit since the last ball? I don't think squeezing into my old formal wear would be appropriate."

She smacks my arm, but her laugh softens the blow. "I had something else in mind." She darts out of the room for just a moment before returning with a carefully folded linen draped over her extended arms. She places it on the bed so carefully, you'd think an infant slept inside. When she unfolds the fabric, I suck in a sharp breath.

The suit is perfect—or it would be, if not for one thing. The light grey colour resembling smoke and ash, accented by pops of clean white and soft blue, makes for a stunning option for the Frost Ball. My own attire pales in comparison. "I can't wear this." The words are out of my mouth before I'd even realized I'd spoken them.

"Someone should. He'd want you to have it."

I touch the fabric and picture the last time I saw Evan wearing it. He'd been only a few years younger than I am now, and likely about my size. I could probably fit in it just fine, but he should be here to wear it himself. This suit would have passed to me when he'd outgrown it, but that's just the thing. He never got the chance. Evan was the best person I knew. He was hard at times, but he cared about people. He was raised to be a king that would put his people first. Born to lead in every sense of the word, a man who only picked up his sword when he had to. It should be him here now.

"I know where your mind is," Tess says, drawing my attention back to her. "You've done the best you could. Evan would be proud of you."

With those words, a dam breaks inside me. The fierce snap of it sends me forward, my shaking arms on the bed the only thing keeping me upright. I feel a hesitant hand on my back, but she's misreading this. "Tess." Her name comes out like a bark, and I have to force my gaze to meet hers. "Thank you for not letting this place fall apart as I did."

"Oh, my dear boy." She grabs me and pulls me into her, enveloping me in the embrace I've so desperately needed. When was the last time someone held me like this? It was probably my own mother. Tess is the closest thing I have to that now. I hug her back, but she pulls away all too soon and wipes a tear from her cheek. "Enough stalling. Get changed and hurry downstairs."



I take my time.

The music that had been missing from these halls for far too long plays freely now, filling the castle with long forgotten memories. When it first reached me, I'd been frozen in place. Captivated by the beauty and paralyzed by the fear that it instilled. For five gruelling years, I'd lived without hope. And now? I want to be able to give my people this joy every night. Abby was right when she called me an absent prince, and it has nothing to do with the days I spent away.

It shouldn't have taken this long for music to return.

When I finally work up the nerve, I make my way to the ballroom. The room had long since fallen into disarray, but the sight before me now steals the very breath from my lungs. The light of a thousand candles illuminates every inch of the rectangular room, and there's not a speck of dust in sight. Tables of food line the walls, as couples twirl around the central dance floor. They move with such grace that it seems impossible that fifteen years have passed since last they danced.

I'm not ready to cross the threshold into this new world of sparkling joy and undying hope, so I lean against it and watch. These are my people, and the smiles they wear fill me with an emotion I haven't felt in so very long. What is that—pride?

I don't belong here. Not anymore.

The invisible darkness that emanates from me threatens to extinguish each and every flickering flame. This suit may make me look like my brother, but I'll never be like him. I haven't yet been noticed. I could leave, slip out through a window and retreat to the forest.

I start to turn, but then I see her. Ruben spins her around the dance floor, the gold lining of her white gown sparkling in the candlelight as sun would sparkle upon snow. The front of her dress is beaded, and the half-sleeves are made of loose feathers of sheer fabric that must tickle her arms as she twirls. I don't recognize this dress, and for the first time, I don't care who it belonged to. It's hers now, as is whatever's left of my shrivelled, blackened heart.

For the first time, I realize how much she's changed since she arrived. The frail, too-thin girl is gone, and in her place dances a woman. A strong, incredibly brave woman.

The song ends, and Ruben leaves her with a kiss on the hand. I expect Abby to retreat to a solitary alcove, but instead, she invites little Fern to share a dance with her. There's no rhyme or reason to this dance—Fern is too young to have known music, never mind the Frost Ball—so she and Abby just spin. I can hear their laughter from here, and I would give anything to be the source of Abby's smile.

Fuck. I would give everything I have to this woman.

Her eyes flick to mine, as if she'd heard my mental curse. She may have, too. The blockades I'd built between us are little more than ash now. I should go to her, ask her to dance, but once again my legs refuse to work.

My heart thumps in my chest as she makes her way to me. There's a faint blush on her cheeks that wasn't there before, and for the briefest moment, I'm hopeful.

"I think I've danced with every man, woman and child here—except for you."

Ask her, you coward. "People dance when they're happy." *Idiot.*

Her face falls, but only slightly. "You should be happy. You're here. This is a celebration for you."

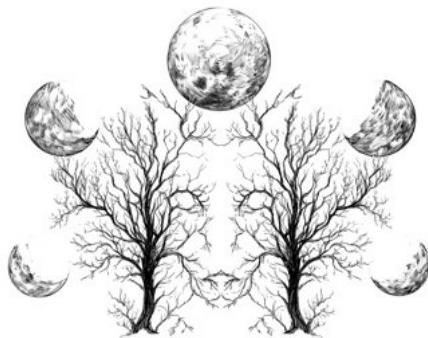
"You don't know what you're talking about." *Shut up before you ruin this night for her.*

She touches a finger to my lips. "We're not going to fight tonight. We're going to dance." She takes my hand in hers and I allow her to lead me. "Unless you've forgotten how," she adds with a playful grin.

"Perhaps I have." I stop, refusing to take another step until she meets my gaze. "Or perhaps you have. Every dance should start with a bow."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

ABBY



*M*y heart beats a wild pace as he sinks low before me. This isn't a normal princely half-bow that's merely a show of casual respect. This is deep, and it carries with it a significance deeper still that's not lost on the surrounding people. To sink so low is to show that my status is greater than his.

He's not getting away with that.

I mirror his bow with a curtsey of my own, sinking as low as he did. We're equals here. His lips twitch up slightly as he leads me to the center of the room, and couples part, relinquishing the dance floor to us. In Lunae this would be customary, but I get the sense that they just don't want to miss this. For Quinn to be here at all is—

The music changes and I can't finish the thought. It's a song I don't recognize, and with it will come a series of steps I couldn't hope to imagine. "I don't think I know this dance," I say, my voice sounding far too breathy. Why am I suddenly so nervous? I've been dancing for what must have been hours without care, but now that it's with Quinn...

He looks towards the musicians. Tess is with them, a knowing smile playing at her lips. Quinn nods once to her before turning his attention back to me. "This was my mother's favourite. I haven't heard this song since—"

I don't want his mind going anywhere near there, so I cut him off. "Will you show me?"

He pulls me against him, so close that I can't imagine how we'll be able to dance like this. But we do. I let him lead me, giving myself over to his prompts as we move. He spins me outwards in time with the quickening music, and holds me close for the lulls. I may not know this song, but I think it's safe to say that it's my favourite too.

His eyes never leave mine, and I had no idea he was such a confident dancer. We could look like a disaster, but I'd never know it by the way he carries himself and the way he carries me.

The song ends, but he doesn't let me go. When the music starts up again with a new song unknown to me, we don't move with it. It's as if this little bubble of us has frozen while the world flies by around us. We're not alone on the dance floor now, and even with other couples spinning around us, neither of us dares break this moment.

Words that have become all too familiar of late pop into my mind without prompting. *Fighting or fucking.*

"What?" Confusion flashes across his features, and my heart all but stops. He couldn't have heard me. Whatever this thing is between us, I definitely did not want him to hear *that!*

"Please tell me you didn't hear that."

His lips twist into an unbearable smirk. “Please tell me that’s your mantra.”

“I’m not telling you anything.”

I didn’t think it was possible, but his smile widens. “Fighting or fucking,” he repeats, as if tasting the words. “Now that explains a lot. So every time you picked a fight with me, you were just turned on?”

I move to pull away from him, but realize we’re already moving. When did we start dancing again?

“I can still stab you.”

His eyes widen at the threat before he leans in closer to whisper in my ear. “Do you have a knife tucked away under all that fabric?”

“You’ll never know.” I push away from him this time, meaning to storm out. Why am I running from him?

“I always did like a challenge,” he says when his hand wraps around my wrist and he pulls me back into him as if this was just part of our dance. We’re not dancing, though. Not anymore. His eyes are serious as they bore into mine, but the evidence of a faint smile remains on his lips. “I need some air. Would you care to join me?” There’s no lust in his voice, so I’m confident that wasn’t an innuendo. Even if it was, I don’t think I’d mind.

I let him lead me out on a balcony I hadn’t noticed before. The stone parapet is adorned with carved roses that snake up the pillars before opening into a stunning bloom. The night sky is clear, and the stars seem to sparkle more tonight than I’ve ever seen them do before.

Quinn sighs beside me, leaning on the barrier as he stares up at the sky. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen the moon like this. Even before the curse, I don’t think I ever took the time to look up.”

I follow his gaze and take in the waning moon, the truth behind his words weighing on my heart. I can’t imagine what that must have been like. To only see the full moon when you looked up to the sky, not being human for the other phases. I wouldn’t blame him if he grew to hate the moon itself.

I move closer to him. Our arms don’t touch, but I’m close enough to feel his warmth against the bare skin of my arms. “I feel like all I did was look up.” I guess I have my own reasons to dislike the moon, too.

He looks at me, his eyes studying my features as if searching for something. “What was it like? Was it all bad?”

I shrug. “It’s hard to know what’s bad when it’s normal for you. I don’t think life is easy there for anyone, but I’m not sure I really understood what it was like for them at all.”

“What do you mean?”

I think back to my last night there and the brief time I spent slinking through the city with Jade and Teagan. They had food. The Guardians didn’t seem to be brutalizing anyone—at least until the Commander showed up. Merrick said they did what they could to keep the people fed with forbidden hunting. It wouldn’t have been a pleasant life, but they were surviving. Without the unjust whippings, they might have even thrived.

“The only time I was allowed to leave the palace was during the Lunar Hunt and for public executions.”

“I refuse to believe that you never snuck out.”

I laugh, but it’s weighted. “No, I did. Even then, I was still on the palace grounds. The only time I really ventured into the city was the night I fled.”

He turns to me and places soft hands against my arms. The frosty chill dissipates and his warmth encompasses me. “You never have to be a prisoner again.”

My heart explodes at those words, as if I'd been waiting my entire life to hear them. There's nothing I want more than the freedom to choose my own destiny, my own life. I can stay here, if that's what I truly want.

But is that what I want?

I stare into his molten amber eyes, and find the only thing I want right now is him. Be it this bond between us or something else, I don't care. Right now, in this moment, he's all I need.

I reach for him, desperate to feel his lips against mine. His arms wrap tight around me, and then I'm weightless for a moment as he lifts me so that I'm sitting on the low stone wall and at eye-level with him. His mouth presses against mine, the same hunger and need coursing through me is radiating out of him. My hands are in his hair, and it's everything I imagined it would be.

But it's not enough. It's not nearly enough.

I don't want to break the connection between us, so I force whatever remains of my focus into a single thought and hope he hears it.

'Bedroom. Now.'

He chuckles softly into me, and then I'm weightless again. I wrap my legs around him this time, and let him carry me. To where? I don't care. If it weren't for some level of modesty, I might have let him take me right there on the balcony.

He lowers me down onto the bed—our bed—and I have no idea how we got here so fast. He breaks our connection only seconds before climbing atop me, his lips trailing kisses down my neck and lower still. I hear the tear of fabric and scattering of beads as a wicked grin spreads across his lips before they move down to my now exposed breasts. His teeth pinch them between kisses, each time coaxing a gasp from me.

Not enough.

A thought pops into my mind, and I have to ask it between breaths. "If you... bit me... would I turn?"

The stubble on his chin tickles when he laughs into me, only just barely lifting his mouth to answer. "Let's not find out."

He's moving now, the trail of kisses getting ever lower, as far as the fabric will allow. And then he's gone. My eyes spring open and I sit up, searching for him in the darkened room. I feel him before I see him, his hand slipping under the skirt of my dress and finding its target with ease.

Wait. That's not a hand.

"I want to see you," I say, and immediately he reaches up to flatten the bunching fabric around my legs.

He lifts his head from me, lips glistening with my wetness. "I'm going to worship every last inch of you. Don't move."

His mouth returns to that place, and the feeling that comes with it is indescribable. This isn't something I've done before, but *fuck*—I never want him to stop. His tongue finds me in all the right places, making my breath catch in my throat. The only relief from the intense need building within me are the fistfuls of satin I desperately cling to. My neck arches and—

He stops.

"Keep going," I pant, only just keeping myself from writhing in search of release.

He kisses me there, but then lifts his head once more. That smirk on his face has never angered me more.

"I want to hear you, Stabby."

"Quinn, please," I moan, and I can't believe he's making me beg. As if to reward me, the sucking

and flicking of his tongue returns. It's wet and warm and wonderful, and my legs begin to tremble. "Don't stop. Don't—" I cry a release.

"That's my girl," he says. His girl? I don't even bother to correct him. That was too good. I can be his girl for the night.

"Take off your pants," I demand, not having nearly had my fill of him.

He's all too happy to obey as he frees himself and then slams inside me, his hips moving with the rhythm of the music I can still faintly hear drifting from downstairs. I move to match him, and for a few blissful moments, we are the music.

I urge him over, and reading my cues perfectly, he flips us so that I'm on top—not even an ounce of hesitation to relinquish control to me. I move with him, testing and teasing until I find the right rhythm. When his breath hitches, I know I've found it.

I mimic his words. "I want to hear you."

"You're so fucking beautiful," he groans through clenched teeth. He reaches up to put his hands on my hips, and I let him because I want to feel him everywhere. They slip lower, squeezing greedily at my backside, and I never want this moment to end. I feel so full with him inside me, all traces of numb emptiness gone. It's just him and I, and nothing else matters.

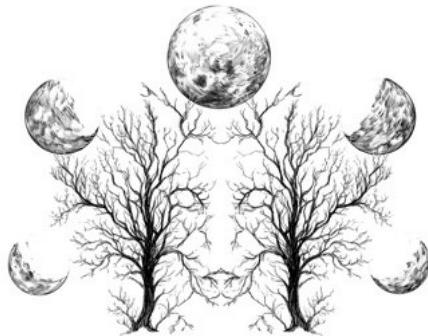
I move faster and faster until all he can do is shout my name with the force of his climax. I ride the wave with him, feeling him spill into me as I gasp for air and then collapse onto him.

He's breathing hard, but eventually he finds the presence of mind to speak. "Sorry about your dress. I liked that one."

"I have no regrets."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

ABBY



A soft sound wakes me. I roll over to find Quinn in a deep sleep beside me, more at peace than I've ever seen him. Whatever happened between us last night seems to have been monumental for both of us. Seeing him like this—so at ease and untroubled—sends a flutter through my heart. It might just be the bond, but... I might actually find myself loving this man one day if I'm not careful.

I hear the sound again—a soft knock on the door—and slip out of the bed to answer it. I have to hold up what remains of my dress to cover my chest as long tendrils of loose fabric fall around me. He really did a number on this. I'd been so caught up in the moment last night that I didn't even realize.

When I peek through the door, I find Tess holding a tray of food and a single teacup. "Good morning," she whispers, likely assuming Quinn is still fast asleep. "I've brought you both some food."

Both. So she knew I spent the night here. How loud were we last night? We weren't exactly trying to be quiet, but if she heard us... She's waiting for an answer, so I launch into one. "Thank you." I reach for the tray, but the front of my dress falls. I catch it before it reveals too much, but by the purse of her lips, I know she saw it.

"The tea is for you. Drink all of it. It will keep your womb from quickening." I've never needed a tea for that. In Lunae, I was so malnourished that getting pregnant was never a concern, but here I'm like an entirely different person. At least Tess was thinking, because I might have been in real trouble otherwise. She must sense my hesitation, because she adds, "Unless you want—"

I cut her off before she can finish that thought and all but rip the tray from her hands. "No! No, I'll drink it. Thank you."

The great thing about Tess is that she knows when not to linger. She may be the most meddlesome person I've ever met, but once her job is done, she makes herself scarce. When I close the door and turn back to the bed, I find Quinn sitting up watching me. "Breakfast in bed?"

I set the tray down between us before draining every last drop in my teacup. "Tess is very thoughtful."

He laughs at the meaning behind my words. "If she knows, so does everyone. Are you okay with that?"

"It's a bit embarrassing," I say, biting into a piece of bread with some kind of red jam on it. I wonder if Tess purposely avoided using citrin because she knows Quinn dislikes it.

He puts a hand over his chest and feigns insult. "Your words are as sharp as ever." His hand finds mine, and there's something about the casual touch that has the emotions of last night flooding back to me. "Do we have a label for this?"

I don't have an answer to that yet, so I ask a question of my own. "Where'd you get that scar?" I point to a long, faded silver line that snakes across the ribs on the right side of his body.

He glances down at it and then laughs. "Sword. Training—when I was seventeen."

"That's some intense training. What about this one?" I drag a finger over another scar just under his left shoulder.

"Wolf." Whether he means it's something he got as a wolf or was caused by a wolf, I'm not sure. I don't bother asking, because it's the human scars I'm interested in.

I point to another. "Human or wolf?"

He laughs, seemingly enjoying this new game. "Wolf."

"Show me a human one."

He tilts his head back and points to a spot just below his chin. There's a small, white scar there that I likely would have never noticed if he didn't point it out to me. "When I was five, I tripped and fell while out on a walk with my mother. I landed on a branch or a rock and split my chin wide open. There was blood everywhere, and I just remember her being so worried because it was the first time I'd really hurt myself." His gaze grows distant as he loses himself in the memory. "What I remember most is her tearing a piece of her dress and holding it to stop the bleeding. She held me, humming to herself, for as long as it took for me to stop crying. She'd promised me it wouldn't scar, but I'm glad it did."

"I like that story." When his expression grows pained, I lay a hand atop his. "What's wrong?"

"I was just wondering what she would say if she saw what that little boy turned into."

I don't want his mind going there, so I reach for the first thing I can think of to distract him. "What were their names? You've never told me."

"My parents? Roald and Sierra." His face relaxes and his lips twist up into a wicked grin. "You know, if you meant to distract me, there are better ways."

He slides the tray out of his way and crawls across the distance between us and my insides ignite. "If we do this, then you're the one asking Tess for more tea."

He laughs. "Deal." Just before he reaches me, a much louder knock sounds on the door and I have to press a pillow against my face to stifle my laugh. Quinn lets out a frustrated groan. "Go away!" His lips find the sweet spot on my neck.

The knock sounds again. "Quinn? I'm sorry to disturb you, but it's urgent."

"What can be more urgent than my need to get inside you?" Quinn whispers in my ear before turning his head towards the door and speaking much louder. "What do you want, Ruben?"

"Someone has arrived from Lunae. He says he's come for Abby."

Quinn leaps off the bed and moves for the door. "Stay here," he warns, pointing a finger at me.

"I will not!" I follow him, searching for anything suitable to wear. It seems he's brought a lot of his own clothes into this room now, which is not something I'm going to complain about as I slip on a too-big shirt and pair of pants.

He gets dressed faster than I would have thought possible, and I don't miss the fact that he straps his belt of knives around his waist. "I don't want you to have to see the things I'll do to your father if ___"

"It's not him," I cut him off, hoping to calm him. Where is this anger coming from? "If anything, it's an envoy making sure I'm dead." I snatch a black cloak and sling it over myself, letting the hood drop low over my head. I won't be recognized dressed like this. "Let's not keep him waiting."

Quinn groans, but doesn't argue. "Stay with Ruben and do not draw attention to yourself."

"I won't. I swear." It's a fair deal. I have no intention of revealing myself to anyone from Lunae.

I'm never going back there.



I follow Ruben down while Quinn leaves to take his own way. He doesn't want us to arrive together, which makes sense. His entrance will be noticed, but mine shouldn't be. When we enter the throne room, we find it packed with people all lined around the edges of the room—save for a single man waiting before the empty set of thrones. He wears a cloak not unlike mine and has his back turned to me.

Before I can even wonder who could have been sent here for me, a door on the other side of the room opens with a thunderous bang and Quinn storms in, dressed in something too regal for him. Flowing fabrics of red and green silk and velvet engulf him. He can't be comfortable, but this is about making a statement. Lunae shouldn't know about this place, and if my father is going to find out, he needs to believe that the ruler here is strong. Once again, it all comes down to appearances.

"Welcome to Rosewood," Quinn says to the stranger. He's putting on an air of pompousness to mask the anger boiling within him, but I can see it there all too clearly. "I am the crowned prince and ruler of this land. Why have you come?"

'Calm down,' I think to him, not sure if he heard me. If he did, he doesn't show it.

The stranger bows. "Your Highness, the King of Lunae has sent me in search of his daughter, Abilene. She was travelling through your forest and went missing some weeks ago."

That voice... It can't be.

Quinn's jaw tightens. "I'm afraid most who venture these woods do not make it this far. You were lucky, but I'm afraid we have not seen your princess."

I'm at the back of the room with Ruben, but I need to see this stranger's face. I need to be sure. I slip away, knowing Ruben won't risk calling after me, and move through the crowd as slowly as I can. The goal is to see, not to *be seen*.

"I know she lives, and I know what stalks these woods. I saw the monster take her."

There are gasps from the crowd, but there's no telling if they're genuine. I don't care enough to wonder. I can almost see his face now. If he just turns his head towards me—

The stranger shifts slightly, and his hood falls back. Sandy blond hair shines back at me in the candlelight, and piercing green eyes remain focused on Quinn.

Jade is alive, and I feel sick.

"Then I'm afraid she's dead." It's Quinn's voice that cuts through the nausea. His tone is firm and dismissive. If Jade was just here as an envoy, he wouldn't risk offending royalty by denying their words... But he isn't an envoy, and if he knows I'm alive, he won't leave here without me.

Jade holds his ground. "She is not. I saw the creature take human form and carry her off. I have returned to slay the beast and rid your kingdom of this terror."

Slay the beast? What is he thinking? If he really saw Quinn turn and carry me away, then he made the conscious decision to allow it to happen. I thought Jade was dead because I never would have imagined him capable of abandoning me. The Jade I knew would have fought for me to his last breath, which can only mean that I didn't know him as well as I thought I did.

Quinn's hands ball into fists at his side, a sure sign that he's losing control. "You survived the monster once. What makes you think you can kill it?"

“I am the best hunter in Lunae. I offer you my service in exchange for your help.” Jade bows again, but I know this is just a show of manners. Jade’s stance on royalty is clear. He and the other Marked long for a world without it. He bows because he has to—not because he wants to.

“A huntsman?” Quinn’s eyes flick to mine, easily finding me in the crowd and well away from where I should be. “I must think on this matter. I will have Tess escort you to a room. We will talk more later.” Tess pushes through the crowd and ambles over to Jade.

“Thank you, Your Highness. I look forward to it.”

I watch as Tess leads Jade towards a door on the opposite end of the room, but lose sight of him when Quinn appears in front of me. He grabs me by the arm, firm but not enough to hurt, and leads me down the hall and back to our room. The walk seems much longer, despite the hurriedness in his steps. He’s seething with rage, and I get the sense that the only reason he’s not shouting right now is because he’s clamping his jaw tight.

Once we’re inside the room, he shuts the door behind him and locks it. Even on our first night in this room when I feared wolves running rampant through the castle, he didn’t lock that door.

“Is that your huntsman?”

“Quinn—”

He spins to face me, and I know by his expression that only a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer will do. “Is that your huntsman? I know his scent. He was there that day.”

“Yes,” I breathe. He deserves to know the truth, and what would be the point of lying to him now? Jade is alive—a fact that should make me unbelievably happy, but instead has my heart feeling as if it’s being ripped in two.

Quinn lets out a roar of frustration and kicks at a bookcase. A few books clatter to the floor before he turns back to me, hands tugging at the roots of his hair as he paces the space between us. “What do I do here, Abby?”

“Let me talk to him.”

“No!” When I startle at his shout, he attempts to calm himself but fails miserably. “He knows too much as it is. The only way to protect my people is by keeping this secret. Lunae can’t know about Rosewood.”

“He doesn’t know what you are.” I’m trying to be a voice of reason, but judging by the stress evident in every inch of Quinn, this isn’t going to get us anywhere. The difference from the calm stillness in him this morning is striking. This is a man terrified of losing everything, and desperate not to.

“He saw me. If he was anyone else, he’d already be dead.”

I gasp at the words, but believe every one of them. Quinn would do anything if it meant keeping his people safe, and the only thing keeping Jade alive now is Quinn’s fear of losing something else that matters just as much to him.

When I can’t answer, he launches into a flurry of questions. “Is he the one who killed Klarissa? During your hunt?”

He can’t be looking to justify this! “You know that’s not fair.”

“He killed one of my people!”

“And you’ve killed how many of his?” He looks as if I’d slapped him, but I don’t back down. “He’s not a monster, and neither are you.”

“You want to go back with him? Is that what you want? Back to Lunae and your fucked up father?”

“No, of course not! I...” I don’t know what else to say. I don’t want to go back to Lunae, but Jade would never take me there. This is all a ruse to find me so that he can bring me to Marein or

somewhere else, but not Lunae. The where isn't what matters. The only question is if I would go with him. I take in the face of the breaking man in front of me, and the last thing I want is to leave him. Not now. Not like this.

"What happens if I let you see him?" His question is calm, but it snaps something in me.

"If you *let* me?" This isn't up to him.

"Will you leave with him?" I don't answer because I can't answer. The silence drags between us for far too long before he finally speaks again. "Looks like you finally did it, Stabby." He places a hand over his heart, and I know exactly what he means. I stabbed him, just like I always said I would.

"Quinn—"

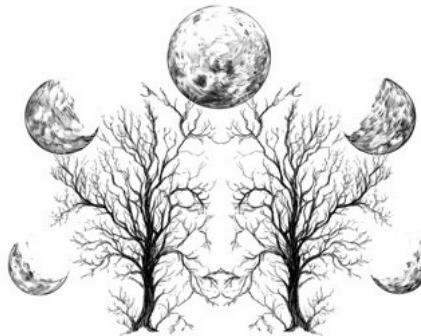
"Don't," he cuts me off as he moves for the door. "I'll be back."

Before I can stop him, he slips out of the room and shuts the door behind him. A lock clicks in place, and when I try to follow him, the door won't budge. I slam my hands against it. "Quinn! Let me out!"

I pound on the door until my fists grow sore, and then slide to the floor, hugging my knees close to my chest. Just last night, he'd promised that I'd never be a prisoner again. I may have stabbed him in the heart, but I think this makes us even.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

QUINN



She can't leave me. Not now. Not after everything. Did last night mean nothing to her? I suppose this is my fault, too. I dared to hope, and she tore into me just as I always knew she would.

I could kill him. It's well within my rights. This is my land, and he killed one of my people. No one would blame me. Except for Abby, of course. I never wanted it to come down to a choice between the safety of my people and the feelings I have for her, but what can I do? If I kill him, I'll lose her for sure. And if I allow him to live? She'll leave me. I'm a man who hates to lose, faced with a situation I can't win.

This is bigger than she realizes. Maybe I should have told her the truth, but then we never would have gotten this far. If she'd just left when I told her to, none of this would have happened. She would be home, Rosewood would be safe, and I wouldn't have to stop myself from ripping the throat out of her huntsman.

What Abby doesn't realize is that if there was no curse, her fate would be the same as it is now. She would be locked away here, or perhaps in Lunae, the prisoner wife of my brother. Memories of my father's plans flood back to me, years of training and preparation resurfacing after five long years of being buried deep within myself. Abby can't know what should have been her fate, just as I can't allow this stranger to leave so long as he means to report back to Lunae. I did all of this to prevent a war. I can't let him inadvertently start one now.

I storm down the hall, following the strange scent in the air that I know will lead me to whichever room Tess put him in. By the time I reach it, the anger and torment swirling inside me has grown into a raging storm that won't easily be quelled. I can't even bring myself to knock, so I thrust the door open. The bang is loud and echoes down the hall, but the huntsman seems unbothered. He sits in one of two chairs at the small table by the window, grinning up at me as if this was his home and I was the guest.

"What a pleasant surprise," he says, and his tone makes the rage inside me bubble like the lava pits of Dragoria. "Would you care to join me, Your Highness?"

Who does he think he is? In the throne room, he'd been courtly and respectful, but now? He didn't even stand when I entered the room. "What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't. Where is Abby?"

My jaw tightens. "Not here."

"So she's dead?" I can tell by his tone that he doesn't believe me.

"That's a safe assumption, yes."

The huntsman sighs. "Well, that's too bad. There's no telling what her father will do when he

hears about all of this.” I get the sense that his words are little more than a thinly veiled threat.

Come on Quinn. Remember your training. This should be nothing. It’s all word games and manipulations. It might have been years since I needed to war in this way, but I still know the rules—or lack thereof. I take the chair across from him, turning it slightly so that I can put my feet up on the bed next to us. It isn’t exactly comfortable, and I have to stretch farther than I’d like, but appearances are the first step.

“I’m sure he wouldn’t be happy,” I agree. “Though it seems to me that you’re overlooking a key piece of information.”

His eyebrows raise in feigned curiosity. “Do tell.”

“You wish to slay the beast, but doing so would have irrevocable consequences on Lunae and her people.”

He leans forward, arms stretching across the table as he moves. “Can I tell you a secret, *prince*? I don’t give a fuck what happens to Lunae or her people.”

I fight to keep my features emotionless, but feel my forehead crease for just a second. It’s enough for him to know he has me. Realization hits, and my feet slip off the bed and I lean in to match his stance. “You’re a Sealander.” I should have known it by his accent. It’s faint, but it’s there, and that mixed with his golden skin and sandy hair...

Shit.

“How’s Roald and your traitorous mother?”

I almost lunge across the table at the mention of my parents. He already knows. If he’s from Marein, of course he would. But why is he still alive? Lunae wiped out Marein near twenty years ago. “Dead. Just like you will be unless you tell me exactly who the fuck you are.”

He laughs, and he’s lucky I can still feel Abby pounding on the barrier I’ve put around my thoughts. She’s convinced I’ll kill him, and oh how I’d love to prove her right—prove to her I’m the monster she fails to see.

“Just an orphan. Something we have in common, it seems.”

I Could. Kill. Him. “What do you want?”

His eyes flick down to my hands balled into fists atop the table. “Quite the temper you’ve got there, *prince*.”

“Stop calling me that.” The words come out like a low growl. This isn’t how this was supposed to go.

“Why not? Because it’s a lie, or are you just that weak?”

I stand, flipping the table with one smooth motion. The huntsman doesn’t even flinch as I close the space between us, putting my hands on either side of his chair in a show of dominance. “Listen close, because I don’t like repeating myself. I don’t want a war with Lunae, and I sure as fuck don’t want anything to do with whatever’s left of Marein. What happened to your people was a tragedy, but it was a tragedy that had nothing to do with me.”

He smiles back at me, but there’s a rigidness to him now that wasn’t there before. “But it has everything to do with your parents.”

“My parents are dead. If it’s revenge you want, your quarrel is with Lunae. Take it up with your king.”

I turn away from him. I know better than to turn my back on an opponent—weapon or not—but I can’t bear to see the look in his eyes. What happened in Marein has haunted me since the day I learned the truth behind my parents’ crowns, and of the blood that coated their swords.

“Is she really not here?” The huntsman’s words have me turning back to him. The pained hatred in

his eyes is gone, and what remains seems to be genuine concern.

“No.” I have to bite my tongue not to say more.

“I guess I’ll go then.” He stands, moving past me without fear.

I could do it right now. His neck would crack before he registered my movement, and my fingers twitch with the longing to do so.

But I don’t.

“What will you tell your king?” I call after him.

He turns back to me, an insolent smile plastered across his face. “That there’s nothing left to find.”

When he leaves, I blow out a long breath and fix the toppled table. I hear someone enter the room, and when the scent hits me, I know it’s Ruben. I’m not surprised he was close. He probably heard the entire exchange, and was likely in the adjacent room before I’d even arrived. Even without war looming on the horizon, he’s as much a warrior as he was before the curse left me in charge.

“Do you believe him?”

I shrug. “Not particularly. There’s something off about him.”

Ruben makes a sound of agreement. “Abby knows him?”

“He wouldn’t still be alive if she didn’t.”

“Orders?” I think this might be the first time Ruben has directly asked me for a command, and the first time I haven’t minded giving one.

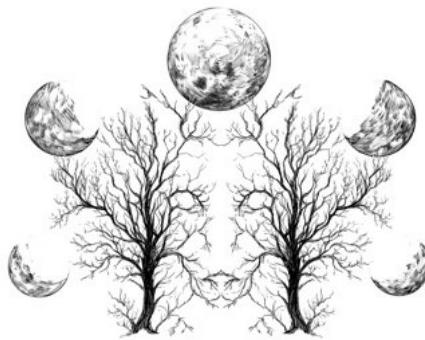
“Take a group and follow him. Don’t engage unless he gives you reason to.”

He nods before hurrying out of the room. A pang of guilt hits me because it shouldn’t be Ruben chasing after him. There’s something about the huntsman that just doesn’t sit right with me, and it’s more than his history with Abby or my family. My gut screams for me to end him now, or, at the very least, lock him away where I can be sure he won’t cause any trouble, but Abby wouldn’t stand for it.

The thought of the huntsman behind bars acts as a stark reminder that I already have a prisoner, and that’s something that must be rectified before she can never look at me the same way again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

ABBY



I don't know how much time has passed, but it feels as if I've been locked in here all day. When the door finally opens, I throw myself towards it, stopping only when I realize it isn't Quinn on the other side. Tess looks smaller than ever, her eyes looking everywhere but at me. I've never seen her so timid before, and that alone has me on edge.

"Where's Quinn?" I ask, just barely keeping the simmering rage from my voice.

"The dining hall. He's requested your presence for dinner."

Dinner? He's got to be joking. I have no intention of eating with him after the stunt he just pulled. How dare he! The slow simmer of fury within me bubbles hotter. "And where's Jade?"

Tess shifts from side to side, avoiding the question as if confused, but she knows exactly who I mean. I wait for her to answer, crossing my arms to keep my chest from splitting open. "I've been ordered not to say."

My eyes narrow. "Quinn doesn't give orders."

"I think you'll find he's in a very princely mood today. Best not keep him waiting any longer."

I allow her to escort me through the halls even though I know the way. This castle has become a second home to me now, but perhaps it was just another prison all along, masked under the beauty and the sweet scent of roses. Quinn has no right to be angry with me, so he can take his attitude and shove it right up his—

"Leave us," Quinn says the instant Tess and I step into the dining hall. Tess bows—actually bows—before scurrying out of the room.

"You're making people bow to you now? What did you say to make her so upset?"

He lets out a heavy huff of air. "Would you believe me if I said not a thing?" I don't answer him, so he gestures to the only empty chair. It's all the way at the other end of the long, dark-wood table and sitting there puts both literal and figurative space between us. "Please sit down."

I remember the last time we sat in this room just like this. It was the morning he'd tried to send me away before I fell ill from an infection in the wound I now know was caused by him. My shoulder burns at the memory, as if the now pink scars remember too.

I do as he says and claim my seat. There's a plate of food waiting for me, but I couldn't stomach it even if I wanted to. He looks as if he wants to tell me to eat, but instead says, "I'm sorry for locking you in there. I acted out of fear and jealousy, and I know it was wrong. I'm sure it will take some time, but I hope you'll come to forgive me."

The last thing I want to hear right now is an apology. "Did you kill him?"

He swallows a bite of his food before answering. "Would you be surprised if I did?"

No. "Yes. You're not a killer."

"But I am a monster." I want to argue, but I'm so tired of trying to convince him he's not the awful creature he believes himself to be. He's an ass, but he's not rotten to the core. I've witnessed the good that fills his heart, and even though I've never been more angry with him, I still want him to see that. He leans back in his chair before wiping the corner of his mouth with a napkin. "Your huntsman came to kill me."

"Where is he?"

Quinn looks annoyed. "He's fine. Ruben and a few others are escorting him out of the forest." So that's what has Tess so flustered. She's worried about Ruben. At least she would know if anything happened. Her connection with Ruben might differ from my connection with Quinn, but in some ways, it's probably stronger.

I have to bite my lip so I don't yell at him. He locked me in that room and denied me the chance to speak to Jade. It doesn't matter that he was afraid I would leave him; it was my choice to make. "How did you make him go?" I can't imagine Jade would just give up, but on the other hand, he's already left me behind once before.

"I told him that the goddess your people believe in—the one who supposedly saved your people with the Lunar Hunt—put the creature in the woods to drive animals to the edge of the forest so your people don't starve. If he kills it, he will doom your people."

Would Jade care if that happened? "And me?"

"He believes you're dead." I can't stop my face from falling, and I know it hurts him. "Do you love him?"

His question takes me by surprise. "What? Love? No, I..." Jade was important to me, *is* important to me, but love? I'm not entirely sure that's something I'm capable of.

"He loves you. Or so it seems. I may not have killed him, but I think I broke his heart."

I don't want to think about that. Not Jade's heart, Quinn's, or even my own. My head is swimming, and all I want is some time to myself. I never thought that I would long for solitude, but nothing shocks me anymore.

I push my plate away. "I'm not hungry. May I be excused?"

"You don't need my permission."

I don't say the words screaming to be spoken, but Quinn's flinch tells me he heard them. '*I thought I was your prisoner.*'

I stand from my chair and move for the door, but don't get very far before a strangled cry and the shattering of glass has me frozen in place. Quinn is out of his seat and racing past me, and when I follow I find Tess kneeling on the floor with her head in her hands. A broken teapot lays shattered before her, the spilled reddish liquid resembling blood and pairing ominously with her wails.

"What's wrong?" Quinn is on his knees beside her, stroking her back with a gentle hand. She leans into him, sobbing so hard that she can hardly get a word out.

"It's Ruben. He's—He's dead."

The heat of the anger coursing through my veins chills in an instant. That huge, powerful, awe-inspiring man can't be dead. Quinn looks as if he's experiencing the same disbelief as I am.

"Why would you say that?" The tremble in his voice is unmistakable. Ruben is the closest thing he has to a father now, and I don't want to think about what losing him would do.

"I can't feel him anymore," Tess sobs. "One minute he was there, and the next...."

"That doesn't mean he's gone," I say, though my words are laced in false hope. The sheer pain in her eyes tells me everything I need to know. If she says Ruben is dead, then he's dead.

“Tess,” Quinn says softly, bringing her gaze back to him. He’s so gentle as he holds the quavering woman against him, but there’s a fury building deep inside him just waiting to be unleashed. “What was happening before...” He can’t finish the question, due to either the pain it causes the woman or the pain it causes him.

“He was following the strangers.”

Strangers? So Jade wasn’t alone.

“How many?” Quinn asks through a tight jaw.

“I don’t know. I don’t—” she cuts off with another wail.

Quinn stands and turns to the gathering of people who have formed around us. I hadn’t even noticed that we’re no longer alone, but I shouldn’t be surprised they came at the sound of Tess’ distress. “Prepare yourselves for battle.”

“Is it Lunae?” a nearby woman quips.

“I don’t know. Be ready for anything.”

Quinn takes a step away, but I plant myself in front of him and lay a hand on his chest. “Tell me you’re not going after them.”

“Is that all you’re worried about? What I’ll do to your huntsman?” There’s hurt in his eyes, and it’s not just for Ruben. He takes another step, but again I block him.

“I’m worried about you.” He stops trying to get away from me and meets my gaze for the first time. I’m still furious with him, but anger isn’t the only thing I feel for this man. “I wouldn’t have left,” I tell him, and I know without a doubt that my words are true. Jade meant the world to me once, and he might still, but as much as the foolish man in front of me pisses me off every chance he gets, I can’t deny that there’s a part of me that loves him.

In the time it takes me to blink, his hands cup my face and his lips press against mine. He backs me up until we press up against a wall, and all I can feel is his warmth against me. There’s desperation in this kiss as if losing Ruben is tearing at his heart and I’m the only thing keeping it from breaking entirely.

He pulls away, and the way he stares into my eyes has my own heart feeling like it might shatter. Why does this feel like a goodbye? “Please don’t go,” I beg.

“I have to.”

“Then I’m coming with you.” He looks as if he wants to refuse, but I touch a finger to his lips to keep him silent. “You can’t keep me locked away.”

He reaches under his shirt, pulls out a knife, and presses it flat against my chest, willing me to take it. “Pointy end in,” he says, and I nod.

Before either of us can say anything else, a scream sounds from somewhere outside and then a warning reaches us. “We’re under attack!”

“Get the children and anyone who can’t fight down to the dungeons,” Quinn barks over a flurry of panicked voices. “Everyone else, with me until we know what we’re up against.”

I’ve never seen so many weapons drawn, and for a moment I envision myself back at the Lunar Hunt—only instead of a stampede of forest creatures headed our way, an unknown enemy lays just beyond the barricaded castle doors. I can’t imagine that Jade is behind this. He would have no reason to hurt Ruben, and unless he brought the Marked with him, he’d have no army to speak of.

There’s commotion just outside the door, and Quinn holds up a hand for silence. I expect to hear the explosive thud of a battering ram, but instead there’s an entirely different explosion. Orange flame consumes the massive wooden doors, sparking wildly and spreading to nearby curtains and decor as if possessed by the need to destroy everyone and everything inside this castle. Something hits the

doors and the weakened wood explodes in a shattering of splinters.

For only the briefest moment, there's nothing but stillness, but before I can even pull in a breath, chaos ensues as people dressed in silver and black uniforms storm the castle.

Guardians.

But how? Why? I don't stop to voice my questions as I drive my knife into the chest of the first Guardian that gets close to me. He falls at my feet, and the nod of approval Quinn gives me before bringing down two Guardians of his own has my heart swelling. He's not hovering by my side, and the fact that he's trusting me to hold my own means more to me than he probably realizes. I know he'll get to me in an instant if I need his help, but he's giving me the chance to defend myself.

That said, there's not a person here who would make the mistake of putting me on even footing with any of the trained fighters here, so I keep to the back of the room, meaning to engage with anyone who makes it by Quinn and the brave men and women who fight beside him. Both sides seem evenly matched in numbers, which strikes me as odd. Lunae has hundreds of Guardians, so why are there only about fifty here? If my father is behind this, why would he not send everyone to wipe out Rosewood the same way he wiped out Marein? Is this a war he thought would be won so easily?

I watch in horror as one of Quinn's people takes a sword to the gut and collapses in a pool of his own blood. Quinn sees it too, and the guttural roar of unbridled rage that he expels could have shaken the castle. In a heartbeat, he's by the fallen soldier's side and slices the head of the Guardian clean from his shoulders with a single swing of his blade. I've never seen Quinn fight with anything but hands and teeth, but he's no stranger to a sword. I bet he could have even posed an actual threat to the Commander.

That thought has my mind questioning everything as I bring down another Guardian. Someone has to be leading this army, but before I can even think who, a small shriek captures my attention. I whip around towards the stairs that lead up to the second floor, and see Fern running from a Guardian who'd somehow gotten past our defences. Why isn't she hiding in the dungeon with the other children?!

'Quinn.' His eyes snap to me the instant I think his name. At first, I think the distraction will endanger him, but he has no trouble landing a fatal blow on his opponent with his eyes locked on me. 'Fern is in trouble. I'm going after her.'

His eyes sweep over the flood of Guardians still flowing through the flaming threshold. 'I can't come with you.'

'No one asked you to.' When he turns back to me, I flash him a half-smile before bolting up the stairs and after my little friend.

It doesn't take long to find her with her screams leading me down a familiar corridor. The hulking Guardian has her cornered, with her back pressed up against a set of ornately carved doors. "Hey!" I shout, and he spins around to face me. "What kind of coward runs from a fight to pick on little girls?"

"What's it to you?" he spits and then swings his long broad sword towards me. The only thing I have going for me is that this corridor is narrow, and swords require range. When I dodge another attack, his sword gets wedged into a decorative credenza.

"Fern, run!" I tell her while he's distracted. She doesn't need to see me kill this fool. At the same moment I turn back to him, he dislodges his sword. I take a step back before he can swing for me again. "Who sent you?"

He laughs. "What business is that of yours?"

"Don't you recognize me?" I ask, pulling the cloak from myself and tossing it to the floor. I may be dressed like a man, but he can't be that stupid.

His eyes widen for only a flash, and a grin spreads across his face. He's missing at least three teeth, and I wonder if that's further evidence of a few damaging blows to the head. "He said you'd be here."

"Who?"

"The Commander."

No. That's not possible. "The Commander is dead."

The man sighs and sheaths his sword. "This is disappointing. We have orders to take you alive."

He steps towards me, and I raise my bloody knife in warning. "I'm not going anywhere." He laughs me off and the second his hand clasps my shoulder, I drive my knee into him as hard as I can. He crumples in front of me with a huff, and without even the thought of hesitation, I drive the blade into the side of his neck. Blood sprays when I pull it from the gash, and even his massive hand can do nothing to stop the flow.

'*I saw Fern. Are you okay?*' Quinn's voice flits through my mind, and it's strange how natural this seems now.

'*I'm fine. You were wrong, by the way.*'

'*About?*' There's a tiredness behind the question, and I can't blame him. There's no telling how the fight downstairs is raging on, but Quinn is no doubt still in the thick of it.

'*The neck is a perfectly good place to stab someone.*'

I feel his ghostly chuckle as much as I hear it. '*You never cease to amaze me, Stabby. Get back here so we can finish this.*'

'*Patience is a virtue.*' I push open the doors that lead out to the garden and step out into the night. The frosty air is fresh, and the bite of small snowflakes is a surprising comfort against the heat of my skin. There's a fresh powdering of snow blanketing the roses in the spiral garden, and my feet crunch as I leave perfect footprints on the untouched balcony. The fire from below provides enough light against the backdrop of freshly fallen snow to see clearly as I race to the wall and stare out over the valley.

I don't see any groups of waiting Guardians, and the relief that fact brings with it has me expelling all the air from my lungs. That is, until I see him. A lone man adorned in a silver mask and a cloak of red and black.

The Commander. Here. *Alive.*

Rage fills me to an extreme that I've never felt before. The years of abuse I've taken from that man compile into a mass of pure hate. I was defenceless then, but not anymore. The bloodied blade in my hand quavers with want as thoughts of driving it into him fill my mind. '*The Commander is my kill,*' I inform Quinn, not leaving any room for argument.

I expect him to agree without hesitation, but a wave of confusion that isn't mine washes over me. '*What Commander?*'

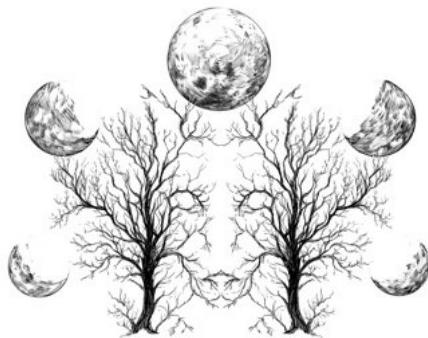
I scan the valley again, and my heart quickens when I realize he's vanished. That's not possible. I know I saw him there. I lean too far over the edge, my feet nearly slipping on the thin layer of snow.

I startle when a thud sounds from behind me, and I spin toward the center of the garden... To where the Commander stands. I want to scream, but before I can, he pulls the silver mask from his face and tosses it away. It skids across the single trail of footprints, but I don't see where it ends up because I can't take my eyes off the man.

I can't take my eyes off Jade.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

ABBY



Jade's eyes meet mine, and a rush of heat runs through me. "I knew that bastard was lying."

"How did you—" I can't finish my question, too distracted by the strange red and black cape billowing behind his bare chest. No... Not a cape. *Wings*. "W-what are you?" I stutter the question as fear and disbelief consume me.

He doesn't answer. Instead, he launches himself towards me, and presses his lips firmly against mine. His leathery wings curl forward, wrapping me in an unnatural embrace that makes my blood run cold. Whether it's the shock or the fact that he's holding me so tight, I can't be sure, but I can't breathe.

"I believe the lady asked you a question."

Jade pulls away from me and turns to face the carved doors. Quinn stands there now, leaning a shoulder against the wall in an attempt to look casual. That is, as casual as he can be while drenched in blood with a sword at his side. Just underneath that calm exterior, rage radiates out of him like violent waves crashing against rock.

Jade smiles and stretches out his wings wide behind him, as if showing that he's the larger creature here. He steps to the side, so that he can talk to both Quinn and me, while ensuring that he's still positioned between us. "One of the last surviving descendants from Dragoria." He flashes me a smile, but the warmth the action used to spark in me is gone. "I told you some myths were based on truth."

It takes effort to will my lips to move, and the word that comes out is little more than a whisper. "Drakling."

"We prefer to think of ourselves as evolved dragons. Drakling is so..."

"Fitting?" Quinn mutters.

"Uninspired."

Quinn scoffs. "I always imagined dragons would be arrogant. You should have stayed extinct."

"Care to rectify that?" Jade takes a step closer, and Quinn straightens off the wall. A twitch runs through him—a sure sign that the change is close.

I won't see them tear each other apart, so I step between them. "Stop it!"

There's curiosity in Jade's eyes before he looks back at Quinn. "Why does she defend you? Have you not told her?"

"Told me what?"

"Who his parents were."

Why does that matter? "Roald and Sierra," I say. Those names were familiar, but I never really

stopped to think about it. A memory from early childhood appears in my mind. A memory from when the Commander took over. He was replacing someone named Roald because he and his wife deserted. I study Quinn's face, but it reveals nothing. "You're from Lunae? But this kingdom, all of these people—"

"All deserters," Jade quips. "Tell her why they deserted."

There's pain on Quinn's face, but he keeps his chin high. A hand runs through his hair, and I know the truth is coming. "My parents served your father loyally. He ordered them, alongside Lunae's army, to attack Marein and slaughter all who lived there. My parents were duty bound, but when the children were rounded up..." He trails off.

"Tell her."

"They left. They took those loyal to them and fled to the forest."

Jade spits in disgust. "They left children to die."

"It wasn't like that," he insists, but something in his eyes tells me it may as well have been.

"Then tell me," I say. At least if we're talking, Jade and Quinn aren't killing each other.

"It was by chance that they stumbled upon this castle—don't ask me who built it, because I don't know. They made a home here. Called themselves King and Queen. Raised Evan and I to—"

"To what?" I urge when he abruptly cuts off. I'm tired of the secrets and lies, and his hesitation only tells me that this is something he's been keeping from me intentionally. I thought we were beyond that.

"We were building our forces. My father wanted to inflict Lunae's own sins upon herself."

"You were going to slaughter my people?!" I can't believe what I'm hearing. They saw the horrors that happened in Marein, and their solution was to replicate it somewhere else? That isn't justice.

"I was meant to fight alongside my brother. You—the eldest daughter and the one true heir—were to marry Evan, so anyone left alive couldn't contest his right to Lunae's throne."

"So he would rule and I would, what? Provide him with a son?"

"Or daughter. We don't discriminate based on gender." Is that supposed to make this better?

"And when your father died?"

"The curse complicated things, but Evan still planned to fulfill his oath."

I can't believe this is the first I'm hearing of this. To think that I trusted this man with my past, and he couldn't even share with me the full truth of his. "And you would have fought beside him?"

"I was in no state for that."

"But you would have if you'd never been cursed?"

"Yes. That was what I'd been trained for." An image of the scar on his side floods back to me. The scar he'd received while training when he was seventeen. Training in preparation of slaughtering my people and giving me to his brother. "You have to believe me, Abby. When the crown fell to me, I didn't want any of that. I would have never brought war to Lunae. That's why I wanted you as far away from here as possible."

"Away from here or away from you?"

"Both."

His words hurt, but there's a bigger issue at hand. Jade came here wearing the Commander's mask, leading an army of Guardians, and possibly much worse. I turn to him. "What happened to your escorts?" I still can't believe that Ruben is dead, and if Jade had anything to do with that...

Jade raises a brow as if confused, but something in his expression tells me he knows exactly what I'm talking about. "Escorts? What ever do you mean?" His tone is mocking, and it's nothing like the

Jade I thought I knew.

"He killed them all," Quinn growls. "I can smell the blood on him."

"I'm not a monster," Jade retorts, and I want to believe him, but the winged creature in front of me makes that difficult. "I left two alive." But not Ruben. He doesn't have to say it.

Quinn's neck arches as the anger flickers within him. "I gave you a chance to leave with your life!"

"She is my life!" Jade shouts back. "I'd be dead if not for her."

I put my hands up as if that will stop them from lunging at each other. I'm tired of this, and I'm not about to let this devolve into a fight over me like I'm nothing but some prize to be won.

When they both go silent, I turn to Jade and lay a hand over his chest. The heart that beats beneath my fingers feels as it always did, but it's far from the human heart I thought it was. "You owe me nothing. Please, just go."

"No!" They both shout the word.

"He had his chance." Quinn's voice is a low growl, and his neck arches again with another jolt.

"Quinn, calm down. It doesn't have to be this way." He's close to changing. I can see it in his features and the slight reddening of his eyes.

"I'm the monster here, aren't I?"

"You don't have to be!" When is he going to realize that he's only as much of a monster as he believes himself to be?

"How do you expect me to let him live when he murdered Ruben?"

"It was self-defence." Jade reaches behind him as if to grab an arrow, but his back is bare. A bow of fire springs to life in his hands, the cocked arrow pointed towards the ground. That means little, because I've seen how quickly Jade can fire.

Quinn stiffens from what could be anger or surprise. This magic is likely new to him, just as it's new to me. "What will it be when you pierce my heart with your arrow?"

"Justice." Jade raises the fire-bow just as Quinn's entire body jerks.

I have to stop this. I won't have either of them die. Jade may be leading this attack, but I have to believe that his actions are from a place of love. To him, this is nothing but a rescue mission.

I do the only thing I can think of and put my hands on either side of Jade's face. His flaming bow dissipates as quickly as it had appeared and his eyes flick from the still shaking Quinn to me. "I'll go with you. If you leave him alive, I'll go with you."

"You wish mercy on your captor?"

"He's never hurt me. He's not what you think he is."

"What do you say, prince?" Jade taunts.

I ignore him and turn to Quinn. There's so much pain in his eyes—betrayal and heartbreak—for both Ruben and me. Ruben was like a father to him, and if he's truly dead, then this will be the second father Quinn has lost. He'll no doubt blame himself for this death, too.

'*Quinn.*' He ignores me, but a tremor runs through him that's different from the violent convulsions already entralling him. '*Quinn,*' I try again, and his eyes slide from Jade to me, softening the instant they meet mine.

'*Please don't leave me.*' He whispers in my mind, and the utter heartbreak that comes with them is crippling. It mingles with my own, and the thing it morphs into is pure agony.

'*You have to let me go.*'

'*I can't.*'

'*You're not the monster you think you are. Be the king I know you to be.*' I turn away from him

and give myself to Jade.

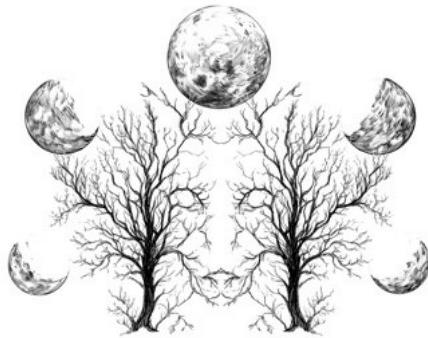
“No!” Quinn shouts, throwing himself towards us.

“Goodbye.” There’s only enough time for a single tear to run down my cheek before I’m in the air. Jade holds me tight in his arms, his wings outstretched behind him, black and red against the grey-clouded sky, scales glistening silver in the moonlight. I never imagined it would feel so lonely up here amongst the stars.

A mournful howl echoes across the land, sounding so distant now as I’m torn away from the man who holds a piece of my heart.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

ABBY



*I*t's cold up here with the wind whipping against me as we fly over the forest. Humans were not meant to fly like birds, and the constant sensation of rising and falling has my stomach tingling. I know Jade would never drop me, but this is terrifying. The steady beat of his wings offers no comfort, as the memory of a hushed conversation between Guardians resurfaces. ‘It was perched atop the stables and had massive wings.’ Could Jade have been the monster they’d spoken of?

“You don’t have to be afraid of me,” he says. The suddenness of his words has the opposite effect, and it takes a moment to calm the rapid beating of my heart. I still haven’t been able to bring myself to meet his gaze, but I can feel his boring into me. What am I supposed to say to that? After tonight, he hasn’t exactly given me a reason not to be.

“Just don’t drop me.”

He chuckles. “Never.”

There’s a sudden rush of wind and my stomach drops as we swoop towards the trees. I want to scream, but keep my lips shut tight. I don’t know how we manage not to hit a single branch as Jade lands with surprising finesse. He releases me the instant we touch the ground, and, for a moment, I wonder why we’ve stopped here. There’s an energy to this area that has me instantly on edge.

“What happened here?” I ask, scanning the area until I spot two men from Rosewood sitting against a tree with their wrists and ankles bound. On the ground in front of them is Ruben. “No!”

I run for him, but don’t get far before arms wrap around my waist and lift me off the ground. “Slow down there, Princess.” That voice isn’t Jade’s, but it’s familiar. I don’t care who it is and jab them with my elbow. My assailant lets out a huff, but doesn’t release me.

“Let her go,” another voice says, and this one I recognize. It’s Merrick.

The man releases me, and I fall to my knees. “Oops, sorry!” I whip my head around and recognize Rhett immediately. When he reaches out a hand to help me up, I slap it away. Petra is there too, though she’s quietly watching me from her seat on a tree branch with what could only be hate in her eyes. If they all survived, how many others did too? There’s no time to ask because once again, I’m moving for Ruben.

I throw myself down on the ground beside him to check for a pulse. His skin is cold, and the only pulse I feel is my own. The only sign of damage to his body is the burn-blackened eye. It’s as if someone had pierced it with a flaming stick—or arrow—that has since vanished.

It would have killed him the moment it penetrated his brain, before he even had the chance to warn Tess of the impending threat. My heart breaks for him, but that emotion comes second to anger. Jade said this was self-defence, but the only way I could see that happening is if Ruben attacked him

as a wolf. I can't be certain how their anatomy works after a shift, but I can't imagine the damage would line up so perfectly with his human form. If I had to guess, he was killed just as he is now. *Human.*

I wipe the tears from my eyes and turn my attention to the captives and their binds. "Release them!"

"So they can attack us again? Not likely." Petra says, dropping from her branch ten feet in the air and nailing the landing.

"Then I'll do it myself." I pull out my knife. Before I dare cut them free, I scan the people around me for any sign of retaliation. Petra looks like she'd sooner take the knife and kill me with it, but she doesn't move. Rhett looks like he doesn't want to be here. Merrick stares me down, while Jade's eyes flit between Merrick and me as if his loyalties are conflicting.

"Don't be too hasty, Abby. I'm sure you know of the beasts they become." If Merrick is trying to warn me, he's doing a poor job of it.

"Of course I know what they are. But what about you? Do you turn into a bat, too?"

Jade and Rhett chuckle, but Merrick looks as if I'd hit a sore spot, given the tightening of his jaw. "Dragons are proud creatures."

"Says the Drakling."

He steps towards me in anger, but Jade moves to block him. "Don't. She may have betrayed me, but that doesn't mean I'm going to let you anywhere near her."

"*Betrayed you?*" That comment has me on my feet.

Jade whips around at the challenge. "I thought titles meant nothing to you, but the second we're apart, you throw yourself at a false prince."

The words sting. That's not what happened at all, but the guilt I've felt since finding out Jade was alive is still very much present. "I thought you were dead."

"You gave up on me."

To my surprise, Rhett takes a step between us and puts a hand on Jade's shoulder. "Come on, man. Lay off a bit."

Jade looks as if he might want to take his growing anger out on his friend, but he pulls back. "I hope he follows us," he grumbles and the words spark fear in me. I hadn't considered Quinn coming after us, but I know in my heart that he will.

'Quinn?' I try to call to him, but there's no answer.

"So do I," Petra agrees, bending over as a pair of black and purple wings emerge from the skin of her back. It doesn't stop there. Her hands sprout a layer of leather-like scales and the tips of her fingers morph into claws that could easily tear through flesh. For only a moment, I wonder if Jade can make himself look just as inhuman, but Petra's continued threat keeps me focused on her. "I'll kill him for what he did to my mate."

Something illuminates in Jade's eyes, and some of the anger in him melts away. "That's right, I haven't told you. Teagan is alive."

"What?" There's no way. I saw her with her throat torn open. She couldn't have survived that. "Is she okay?"

"No," Petra says, pursing her lips before Jade can answer. I want to ask more, but the heads of the four people in front of me all snap in the direction of Rosewood. "Finally!" Petra quips as she stretches a clawed hand.

Jade darts to my side with impossible speed as the sound of thundering paws hitting earth reaches me. Seconds later, Quinn bounds through the trees and skids to a halt only a few yards from us. Jade

readies an arrow of fire, and Petra looks as if she's about to hurtle herself towards the wolf, but I lurch forward and plant myself in front of the animal.

"Don't you fucking dare!" I don't give Jade a chance to answer before turning to face Quinn. He won't risk hurting me, and although I don't trust Petra as far as I could throw her, I trust Jade enough to keep her back. "Quinn," I whisper. His gaze slips from mine and washes over the scene, stopping only when it lands on the two captives and the body that lays in front of them. His whimper morphs into a snarl as heartbreak turns to rage.

"Get away from it!" Jade is at my side in seconds—to protect me, I realize. But I'm not in danger. Even after everything, I trust the wolf in front of me more than the man at my side.

"He won't hurt me, but you already knew that!" I push against Jade's chest, meaning to get him away from me, but he's solid and doesn't budge. "You accused me of betraying you, but you left me here!" The shock of everything is finally beginning to recede and all that's left is fury.

Jade looks confounded, but there's not a hint of guilt on his face. "I knew you were alive. I could feel it." He touches a hand to my chest, just over my heart, but I slap it away.

Merrick steps forward. "I don't think now is the time for a lover's quarrel."

Quinn snaps his jaws again, as if in agreement. I move closer to him, but when I feel Jade grip my arm, it takes all of my strength to pull away. "I already agreed to go with you, so you can keep your hands off me!"

He lets go at once, but I can tell he doesn't like the idea of me being anywhere near Quinn. Not in this state, nor his human form.

Quinn growls at me as I approach, his eyes never leaving mine. '*You won't hurt me.*' The shake of his head tells me he's heard me. '*You have to let me go. This is the only way to keep Rosewood safe.*'

He doesn't answer. Maybe he can't answer in this state. I can feel the pain inside him as if it were my own and get a flash of myself through his eyes. The image of me in Jade's arms as he took to the air, a small, orange ball falling to the place we'd been only seconds before... and the garden erupting into flames. The fire spreads, melting snow and snaking up walls until those beautiful carved doors too are burning.

No. No, Jade couldn't have... I'd left with him so that he would leave Quinn unharmed, but instead he'd set the entire castle on fire. The fire on the ground floor was under control, but Quinn's vision shows a different story. He left his people—his home—to come after me. He may not be able to say the words, but I know from the look in his eyes that he would happily let the world burn if it meant I was with him.

He shows me another image—a memory. The knife in my hand pressed against his heart. He can't mean for me to—

His growl is confirmation enough as he takes a step closer. My hand shakes, but I don't drop the blade. "Don't make me do it," I plead.

He crouches low, and I've seen this before too many times. He's going to lunge for me, and if I don't do it, then Jade or Petra surely will.

My eyes burn and I have to bite my lip to keep the tears from falling. I can't do it. He's not a monster. I can't—

His growl turns into a whimper as he leaps for me. His body connects with mine the same moment I drive my knife into his chest, all the way down to the hilt. The weight of him pins me to the ground and knocks the air from my lungs.

"Abby!" It's Jade's voice I hear, and it must be his hands I feel as I'm dragged out from under

Quinn. I shake free of Jade's grip and drop to my knees in front of the wolf. Amber eyes stare up at me, but there's a fluttering to his eyelids that wasn't there before.

"Shit, she actually did it," Petra says from somewhere behind me, but I ignore her. I ignore everything but the animal in front of me. I need to finish this, even if it kills me.

I reach into his thick fur and feel around until my fingers touch the hilt of my knife. He yelps as I pull it from him. "I'm sorry it had to be this way."

No one stops me as I move to Quinn's people and slice through the ropes binding their wrists and ankles. They scramble to their feet, shaking, as if fighting the urge to turn themselves—something they shouldn't be able to do without the light of the full moon. Perhaps the sight of their prince like this is too much for them.

This isn't how things are going to go down. I won't allow it.

One of them moves, and I put out a hand to stop them. "Don't!" The tremors cease at my command. "I've had enough of this. Take Ruben and Quinn back to Rosewood." They look as if they want to obey, but glance at Jade and the others. I turn to them. "Does anyone have a problem with that? I've already killed tonight. I have no problem taking out a few more."

Petra laughs as if the idea of me with a knife against her is the biggest joke she's ever heard, but Merrick's face holds its seriousness. "They're free to go," he says.

Jade takes a step closer to Quinn, but I don't sense malice in him. He merely stares down at the ever-growing pool of blood stark against the snow. "Your dog won't survive the journey."

I ignore the sting in my eyes and focus on the anger swirling inside me. "Then his body will be burned and he will be reunited with his family. You can afford him that kindness." I don't even know if such a thing would be possible now if the garden was destroyed, and the thought of the castle engulfed in flames has my rage building. I fight to keep it under control because now isn't the time for it.

"I can," he agrees. "Do you want to stay with him until he—"

"No," I say quickly. I need to get out of here. "Take me to Marein."

Jade and Merrick share a look before he answers me. "We're not going to Marein. We're going to Lunae."

Bile rises in my throat as the icy hand of fear grips me from the inside. I'd hoped the Guardians that fought for him were deserters or allies. I could handle Marein or anywhere else, but Lunae?

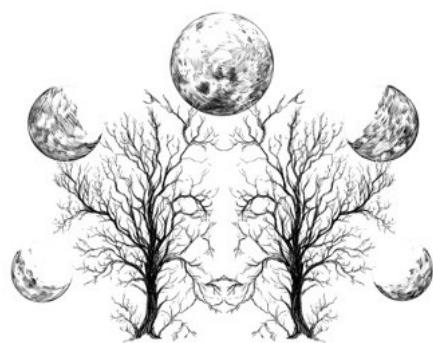
Quinn stares up at me with the last of his strength, and I know he would save me from this if he could. I pull in a deep breath and force the fear back down. There's no time. "Fine. Let's go."

Jade scoops me up in his arms as wings sprout from the backs of his remaining friends. It's strikingly similar to the transformation of the wolves, and yet so different. Two scars on either side of their backs split open as leather and scale erupt from bone. Someone of their kind might stand out with those scars, so being one of the Marked is the perfect cover. Not all the Marked would be these creatures, but knowing that Jade and the others are is a betrayal in itself. Jade was the first person I'd saved, but the others? They may have counted on my mercy and taken advantage of it so that they could hide in plain sight.

I can't bring myself to look back as I leave Quinn behind for the second time tonight. I can only hope that his people will be able to get him back to Rosewood in time.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

ABBY



TWO WEEKS LATER

A knock sounds on my door. Normally Teagan would answer it, but she's barely looked at me since my return. The damage to her throat had been severe, and although she somehow managed to survive the attack, her vocal cords were severed. She's a ghost of the person she was before, and the absence of her songs and laughter weighs on her deeply. She may have survived, but a part of her died that day.

When the knock comes again, I tuck the book of dragons I'd been flipping through yet again under my pillow and move to answer the door. When I see Jade on the other side, the only thing stopping me from slamming the door in his face is the foot he'd wedged in front of the threshold.

"Abby, stop. When are you going to talk to me?" He looks so much like the man I remember, but it's nearly impossible not to envision the creature he becomes. I could get past the whole dragon thing, but I can't overlook his actions.

"When are you going to realize that I don't want to?"

There's a genuine sadness in his eyes. "Then just listen. I promise I'll leave you alone."

I groan and move away from the door, allowing him to enter the only space that still feels like mine. I reclaim my spot on the bed, but refuse to meet his gaze. I'm not ready for that yet. "What are you doing here, anyway? Shouldn't you be at the hunt?"

"Shouldn't you?" he asks, turning the question around on me. This is the first full moon since I left Rosewood, and although I'm free to attend the Lunar Hunt as always, I can't bring myself to do it. I don't want to be reminded of what I've lost and what still might linger within those trees. I'd rather lock myself away as a willing prisoner. When I don't respond, Jade continues. "Your father gave me permission to stay behind. Imelda and the young prince are here as well."

I want to ask if he's here as my guard or theirs, but I don't want to keep this conversation running longer than necessary. "Say what you need to and get out."

He sighs and looks as if he wants to take one of my hands in his, but thinks better of it. "I knew you were alive. When I saw him carry you off, I knew you'd be okay until I could get to you. Teagan," he looks at her, but she doesn't react to her name, "needed help. My people needed help. I had to make sure they survived. And you... You had your freedom. I got you away from Lunae, which was all I wanted." He drops to his knees in front of me. "It killed me to stay away from you, but I did it so that you could live. When I heard you calling to me, I—"

"What?" I look into his eyes for the first time and see nothing but truth in them.

"I heard you through the bond between us. You begged me to come back to you."

Confusion flutters in me for only a moment before I realize what he must be referring to. I'd called to Quinn through the bond when he was in the forest and asked him to come back. If there's something between Jade and I still... "I wasn't talking to you."

He chews at his lip. "I see. That still doesn't change the way I feel about you. I was angry at first, and for that I'm sorry, but I want to make this work for us. You mean the world to me, and—"

I interrupt him before he can take those words any further. "If you're finished, I'd like to be alone."

Pain flashes across his features, but he stands without argument and moves for the door. Just

before he shuts it behind him, he says, “If you need anything, I’ll be right outside.”

“I don’t suppose you have any advice?” I say to Teagan once we’re alone. She has ink and parchment, but I’ve never once seen her use it. Even now, it’s as if she hadn’t heard my question or the exchange with Jade. I hope she at least speaks to Petra through their bond, but even that seems unlikely.

I move to the window and stare out over the land. The full moon is high in the sky now. If there are any wolves left, the hunt should start soon, if it hasn’t already. My father and Arabella will be there, well away from the danger. I’ve hardly spoken to my father since my return, and I haven’t spoken to Arabella at all. Or rather, she hasn’t spoken to me. She hasn’t even met my gaze since I’ve returned, and I don’t care enough to try to uncover her reasons for that now.

There have been changes in Lunae. From what I could gather, when Jade returned with Teagan, he’d told my father that she and I ran on our own. There was no reason to question her since she’d lost the ability to speak, so Jade’s word was taken at face value and with the Commander dead, the role needed filling. I know in the past, a Commander was chosen by winning a duel against any other Guardian who wanted to challenge for the spot, but I didn’t bother to ask if that’s how Jade secured his place. It seems his promotion changed—or at least delayed—the Markeds’ plans of returning to Marein. I doubt even Jade would tell me of their plans now.

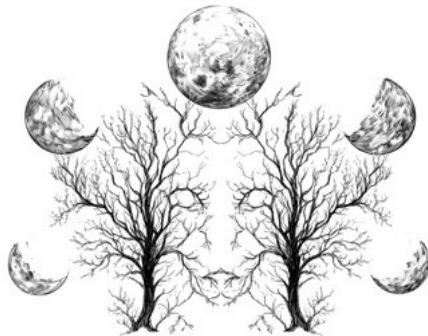
All I’ve done since returning is flip through that useless book of dragons and wait for nightfall. Once the moon was visible over the horizon, I would plant myself in this chair by the window and stare out in the direction of Rosewood. In the direction of *home*.

Each and every night, I’ve called out to Quinn through our bond, desperate for an answer. Quinn should be dead, but until I know for sure, I’m going to keep calling out for him. Until I feel the same pain and loss as Tess, I’m not going to give up, even if I have to keep enduring the same heartbreak over and over when my only answer is agonizing silence.

I pull in a deep breath and brace myself for the pain before thinking his name—*feeling* his name with every cell of my body and hoping beyond hope that this will be the night he answers. ‘Quinn?’

‘Hey, Stabby.’

EPILOGUE



She missed.

I was prepared to choose death over a life without her, but there was one more gamble we could make. Her huntsman would have stopped at nothing until I was dead. Bargaining with her freedom had meant nothing to him, and when she finally saw that, I showed her the memory of teaching her the difference between man and wolf.

The ridges of the new scar on my chest feel rough directly above my heart. My *human* heart. She'd missed the wolf's entirely, but still I'm lucky I didn't bleed to death right there and then. For once, it seems, fate was on my side.

I couldn't shift back into my human form until the wound had closed, and when I was ready to try, the change wouldn't come. I had to embrace the monster to survive and rely on the dark magic that cursed me. When the full moon finally made its appearance, the monster relinquished.

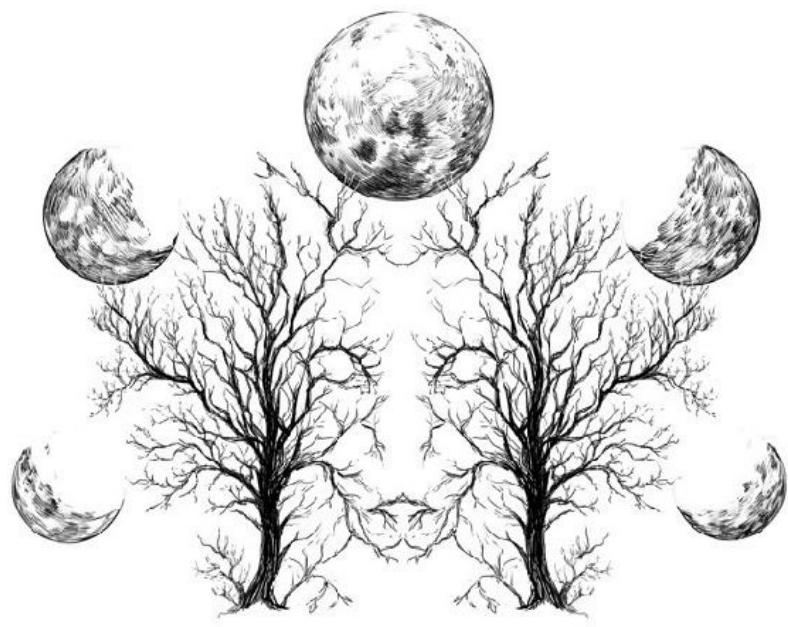
I'm standing on the balcony now in the same spot where I'd once stood with Abby on that last incredible night we shared together. The night she made me feel more man than monster and allowed me to love every part of her with every part of me. I squeeze at the crown in my hand—the crown I'd once sworn I would never wear—and bring it to my head.

The gathered wolves below me howl in approval. They're not wild now, not like they were before I accepted the curse and what it made me. They obey me in this form as much as they do while human. The fire had nearly destroyed Rosewood, and much of what remains will forever be blackened by the attack. We all lost someone that day, and we all have something to fight for now.

Abby sacrificed the one thing she wanted more than anything to save Rosewood, and I know she'd gladly live out the rest of her days in Lunae if it meant our people were safe. She's a better person than I am, though. I once swore that I would never lead my people to war, but I'd sacrifice everything to free her from that prison.

'I'll see you soon,' I tell her—and when I do, I'll bring Lunae to its knees.

END OF BOOK ONE



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If you loved Ash and Roses, it would mean the world to me if you left a review. You can also email me directly at noel@snowstormpress.ca. I would love to hear from you!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



N.B. Snook is a Canadian author with a proud Scottish heritage. A world-traveler by the age of twenty, her adolescence was fuelled by adventure. Now, she prefers to spend her days sipping mocha lattes by the Toronto lakeshore and working on her latest novel. She's a lover of cats, dinosaurs, and massive portions of spaghetti. Thunderstorms excite her, true crime fascinates her, and oranges are her enemy.

N.B. Snook also writes thrillers under the name Noel B. Snook.



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I usually have trouble figuring out where to begin when it comes to the Acknowledgments section (I'm much better at writing fiction!), but that is most certainly not the case this time. I have so much gratitude for my amazing ARC team, and know that this book's release wouldn't have been nearly as successful were it not for all of you. An ARC reader's job is to read and review—but so many of you went miles beyond that.

I want to thank those of you on the ARC team who not only reviewed on Goodreads and Amazon, but blasted those reviews all over social media as well. Some of you were relentless in sharing my posts and making your own, all in the hopes that more readers would discover this book. I even had emails from some of you asking how you could better help with getting the word out, and that is just so amazing to me.

I also need to thank my eagle-eyed ARC readers who caught the sneaky typos that buried themselves deep within the book. You took no prisoners to ensure that *Ash and Roses* was ready to brave the bookshelves, and I appreciate you so, so much!

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